The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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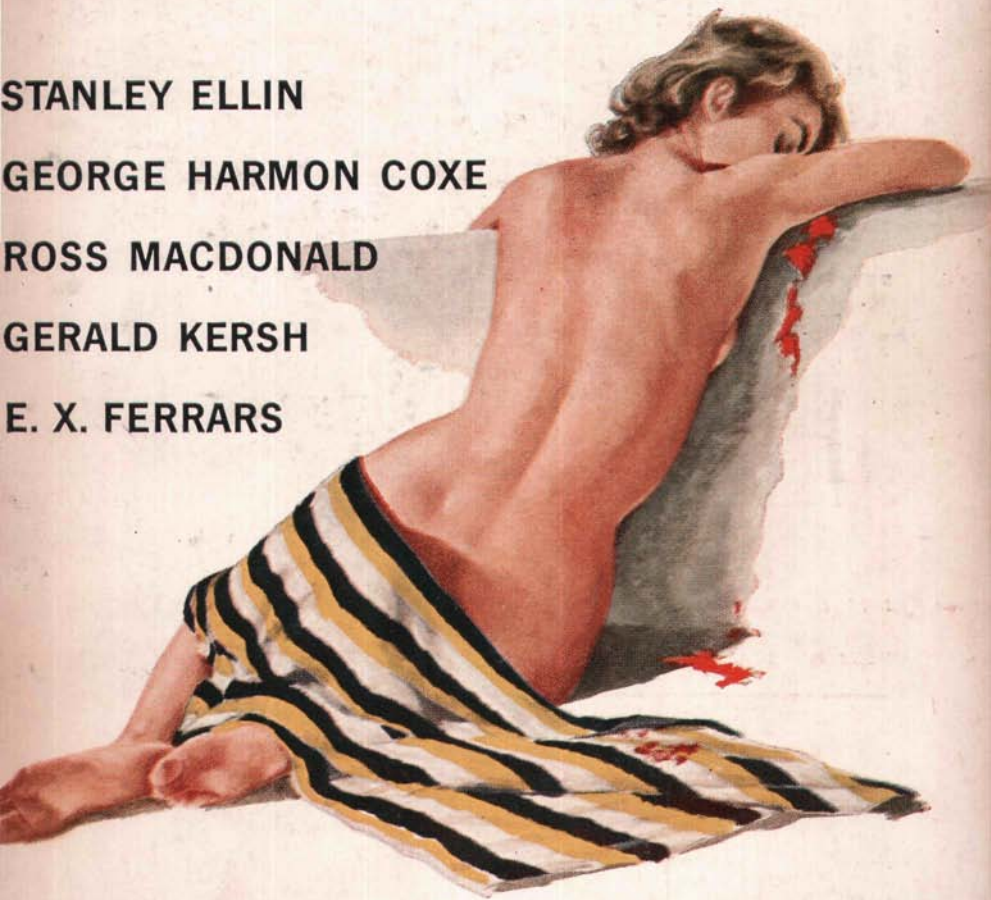

It's dangerous for a pretty girl to take a shower in a strange man's apartment...

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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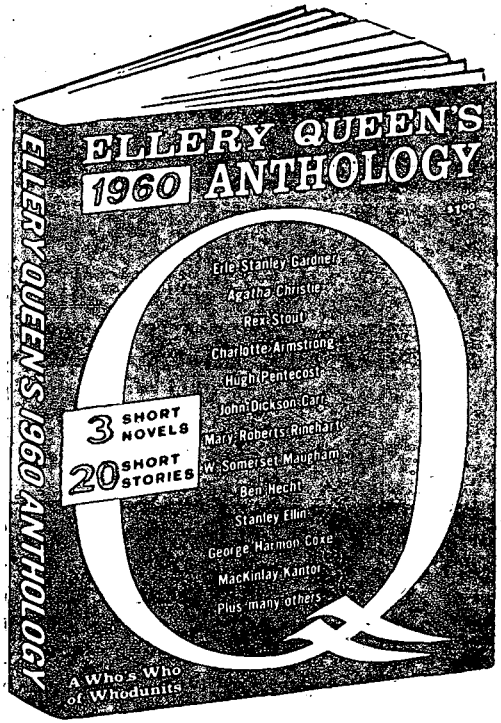

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **STANLEY ELLIN**

TITLE: ***The Day of the Bullet***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Brooklyn

TIME: 1923

COMMENTS: *It all started a long time ago—a murder destined to occur with the inevitability of Fate itself. But it took 35 years for the predetermined bullet to be fired . . .*

I BELIEVE THAT IN EACH LIFETIME there is one day of destiny. It may be a day chosen by the Fates who sit clucking and crooning over a spinning wheel, or, perhaps, by the gods whose mill grinds slow, but grinds exceedingly fine. It may be a day of sunshine or rain, of heat or cold. It is probably a day which none of us is aware of at the time, or can even recall through hindsight.

But for every one of us there is that day. And when it leads to a bad end it's better not to look back and search it out. What you discover may hurt, and it's a futile hurt because nothing can be done about it any longer. Nothing at all.

I realize that there is a certain illogic in believing this, something almost mystical. Certainly it would win the ready disfavor of those modern exorcisists and dabblers with crystal balls, those psychologists and sociologists and case workers who—using their own peculiar language to express it—believe that there may be a way of controlling the fantastic conjunction of time, place, and event that we must all meet at some invisible crossroads on the Day. But they are wrong. Like the rest of us they can only be wise after the event.

In this case—and the word "case" is particularly fitting here—the event was the murder of a man I

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had not seen for thirty-five years. Not since a summer day in 1923, or, to be even more exact, the evening of a summer day in 1923 when as boys we faced each other on a street in Brooklyn, and then went our ways, never to meet again.

We were only twelve years old then, he and I, but I remember the date because the next day my family moved to Manhattan, an earth-shaking event in itself. And with dreadful clarity I remember the scene when we parted, and the last thing said there. I understand it now, and know it was that boy's Day. The Day of the Bullet it might be called—although the bullet itself was not to be fired until 35 years later.

I learned about the murder from the front page of the newspaper my wife was reading at the breakfast table. She held the paper upright and partly folded, but the fold could not conceal from me the unappetizing picture on the front page, the photograph of a man slumped behind the wheel of his car, head clotted with blood, eyes staring and mouth gaping in the throes of violent and horrifying death.

The picture meant nothing to me, any more than did its shouting headline—*RACKETS BOSS SHOT TO DEATH*. All I thought, in fact, was that there were pleasanter objects to stare at over one's coffee and toast.

Then my eye fell on the caption below the picture, and I almost dropped my cup of coffee. *The body of Ignace Kovac,* said the caption, *Brooklyn rackets boss who last night—*

I took the paper from my wife's hand while she looked at me in astonishment, and studied the picture closely. There was no question about it. I had not seen Ignace Kovac since we were kids together, but I could not mistake him, even in the guise of this dead and bloody hulk. And the most terrible part of it, perhaps, was that next to him, resting against the seat of the car, was a bag of golf clubs. Those golf clubs were all my memory needed to work on.

I was called back to the present by my wife's voice. "Well," she said with good-natured annoyance, "considering that I'm right in the middle of Walter Winchell—"

I returned the paper to her. "I'm sorry. I got a jolt when I saw that picture. I used to know him."

Her eyes lit up with the interest of one who—even at second-hand—finds herself in the presence of the notorious. "You did? When?"

"Oh, when the folks still lived in Brooklyn. We were kids together. He was my best friend."

My wife was an inveterate tease. "Isn't that something. I never knew you hung around with juvenile delinquents when you were a kid."

"He wasn't a juvenile delinquent. Matter of fact—"

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"If you aren't the serious one." She smiled at me in kindly dismissal and went back to Winchell who clearly offered fresher and more exciting tidings than mine. "Anyhow," she said, "I wouldn't let it bother me too much, dear. That was a long time ago."

It was a long time ago. You could play ball in the middle of the street then; few automobiles were to be seen in the far reaches of Brooklyn in 1923. And Bath Beach, where I lived, was one of the farthest reaches. It fronted on Gravesend Bay with Coney Island to the east a few minutes away by trolley car, and Dyker Heights and its golf course to the west a few minutes away by foot. Each was an entity separated from Bath Beach by a wasteland of weed-grown lots which building contractors had not yet discovered.

So, as I said, you could play ball in the streets without fear of traffic. Or you could watch the gas-lighter turning up the street lamps at dusk. Or you could wait around the firehouse on Eighteenth Avenue until, if you were lucky enough, an alarm would send the three big horses there slewing the pump-engine out into the street in a spray of sparks from iron-shod wheels. Or, miracle of miracles, you could stand gaping up at the sky to follow the flight of a biplane proudly racketing along overhead.

Those were the things I did that summer, along with Iggy Kovac, who was my best friend, and who lived in the house next door. It was a two-story frame house painted in some sedate color, just as mine was. Most of the houses in Bath Beach were like that, each with a small garden in front and yard in back. The only example of ostentatious architecture on our block was the house on the corner owned by Mr. Rose, a newcomer to the neighborhood. It was huge and stuccoed, almost a mansion, surrounded by an enormous lawn, and with a stuccoed two-car garage at the end of its driveway.

That driveway held a fascination for Iggy and me. On it, now and then, would be parked Mr. Rose's automobile, a gray Packard, and it was the car that drew us like a magnet. It was not only beautiful to look at from the distance, but close up it loomed over us like a locomotive, giving off an aura of thunderous power even as it stood there quietly. And it had *two* running-boards, one mounted over the other to make the climb into the tonneau easier. No one else around had anything like that on his car. In fact, no one we knew had a car anywhere near as wonderful as that Packard.

So we would sneak down the driveway when it was parked there, hoping for a chance to mount those running-boards without being caught. We never managed to do it. It seemed that an endless vigil was being kept over that car, either by Mr. Rose himself or by someone

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who lived in the rooms over the garage. As soon as we were no more than a few yards down the driveway a window would open in the house or the garage, and a hoarse voice would bellow threats at us. Then we would turn tail and race down the driveway and out of sight.

We had not always done that. The first time we had seen the car we had sauntered up to it quite casually, all in the spirit of good neighbors, and had not even understood the nature of the threats. We only stood there and looked up in astonishment at Mr. Rose, until he suddenly left the window and reappeared before us to grab Iggy's arm.

Iggy tried to pull away and couldn't. "Leggo of me!" he said in a high-pitched, frightened voice. "We weren't doing anything to your ole car! Leggo of me, or I'll tell my father on you. Then you'll see what'll happen!"

This did not seem to impress Mr. Rose. He shook Iggy back and forth—not hard to do because Iggy was small and skinny even for his age—while I stood there, rooted to the spot in horror.

There were some cranky people in the neighborhood who would chase us away when we made any noise in front of their houses, but nobody had ever handled either of us or spoken to us the way Mr. Rose was doing. I remember having some vague idea that it was because he was new around here, he didn't know yet how people around here were supposed to act, and when I look back now I think I may have been surprisingly close to the truth. But whatever the exact reasons for the storm he raised, it was enough of a storm to have Iggy blubbering out loud, and to make us approach the Packard warily after that. It was too much of a magnet to resist, but once we were on Mr. Rose's territory we were like a pair of rabbits crossing open ground during the hunting season. And with just about as much luck.

I don't want to give the impression by all this that we were bad kids. For myself, I was acutely aware of the letter of the law, and had early discovered that the best course for anyone who was good-natured, pacific, and slow afoot—all of which I was in extra measure—was to try and stay within bounds. And Iggy's vices were plain high spirits and recklessness. He was like quicksilver and was always on the go and full of mischief.

And smart. Those were the days when at the end of each school week your marks were appraised and you would be reseated according to your class standing—best students in the first row, next best in the second row, and so on. And I think the thing that best explains Iggy was the way his position in class would fluctuate between the first and sixth rows. Most of us never moved more than one row either

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way at the end of the week; Iggy would suddenly be shoved from the first row to the ignominy of the sixth, and then the Friday after would just as suddenly ascend the heights back to the first row. That was the sure sign that Mr. Kovac had got wind of the bad tidings and had taken measures.

Not physical measures, either. I once asked Iggy about that, and he said. "Nah, he don't wallop me, but he kind of says don't be so dumb, and, well—you know—"

I did know, because I suspect that I shared a good deal of Iggy's feeling for Mr. Kovac, a fervent hero worship. For one thing, most of the fathers in the neighborhood "worked in the city"—to use the Bath Beach phrase—meaning that six days a week they ascended the Eighteenth Avenue station of the B.-M.T. and were borne off to desks in Manhattan. Mr. Kovac, on the other hand, was a conductor on the Bath Avenue trolley-car line, a powerful and imposing figure in his official cap and blue uniform with the brass buttons on it. The cars on the Bath Avenue line were without side walls, closely lined with benches from front to back, and were manned by conductors who had to swing along narrow platforms on the outside to collect fares. It was something to see Mr. Kovac in action. The only thing comparable was the man who swung himself around a Coney Island merry-go-round to take your tickets.

And for another thing, most of the fathers—at least when they had reached the age mine had—were not much on athletics, while Mr. Kovac was a terrific baseball player. Every fair Sunday afternoon down at the little park by the bay there was a pick-up ball game where the young fellows of the neighborhood played a regulation nine innings on a marked-off diamond, and Mr. Kovac was always the star. As far as Iggy and I were concerned, he could pitch like Vance and hit like Zack Wheat, and no more than that could be desired. It was something to watch Iggy when his father was at bat. He'd sit chewing his nails right through every windup of the pitcher, and if Mr. Kovac came through with a hit, Iggy would be up and screaming so loud you'd think your head was coming off.

Then after the game was over we'd hustle a case of pop over to the team, and they would sit around on the park benches and talk things over. Iggy was his father's shadow then; he'd be hanging around that close to him, taking it all in and eating it up. I wasn't so very far away myself, but since I couldn't claim possession as Iggy could, I amiably kept at a proper distance. And when I went home those afternoons it seemed to me that my father looked terribly stodgy, sitting there on the porch the way he did, with loose pages of the Sunday paper around him.

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When I first learned that I was going to have to leave all this, that my family was going to move from Brooklyn to Manhattan, I was completely dazed. Manhattan was a place where on occasional Saturday afternoons you went, all dressed up in your best suit, to shop with your mother at Wanamakers or Macy's, or, with luck, went to the Hippodrome with your father, or maybe to the Museum of Natural History. It had never struck me as a place where people *lived*.

But as the days went by my feelings changed, became a sort of apprehensive excitment. After all, I was doing something pretty heroic, pushing off into the Unknown this way, and the glamor of it was brought home to me by the way the kids on the block talked to me about it.

However, none of that meant anything the day before we moved. The house looked strange with everything in it packed and crated and bundled together; my mother and father were in a harried state of mind; and the knowledge of impending change—it was the first time in my life I had ever moved from one house to another—now had me scared stiff.

That was the mood I was in when after an early supper I pushed through the opening in the hedge between our back yard and the Kovac's, and sat down on the steps before their kitchen door. Iggy came out and sat down beside me. He could see how I felt, and it must have made him uncomfortable.

"Jeez, don't be such a baby," he said. "It'll be great, living in the city. Look at all the things you'll have to see there."

I told him I didn't want to see anything there.

"All right, then don't," he said. "You want to read something good? I got a new Tarzan, and I got *The Boy Allies at Jutland*. You can have your pick, and I'll take the other one."

This was a more than generous offer, but I said I didn't feel like reading, either.

"Well, we can't just sit here being mopey," Iggy said reasonably. "Let's do something. What do you want to do?"

This was the opening of the ritual where by rejecting various possibilities—it was too late to go swimming, too hot to play ball, too early to go into the house—we would arrive at a choice. We dutifully went through this process of elimination, and it was Iggy as usual who came up with the choice.

"I know," he said. "Let's go over to Dyker Heights and fish for golf balls. It's pretty near the best time now, anyhow."

He was right about that, because the best time to fish for balls that had been driven into the lone water hazard of the course and never recovered by their owners was at sunset when, chances were, the place would be deserted but there would

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still be enough light to see by. The way we did this kind of fishing was to pull off our sneakers and stockings, buckle our knickerbockers over our knees, then slowly and speculatively wade through the ooze of the pond, trying to feel out sunken golf balls with our bare feet. It was pleasant work, and occasionally profitable, because the next day any ball you found could be sold to a passing golfer for five cents. I don't remember how we came to fix on the price of five cents as a fair one, but there it was. The golfers seemed to be satisfied with it, and we certainly were.

In all our fishing that summer I don't believe we found more than a total of half a dozen balls, but thirty cents was largesse in those days. My share went fast enough for anything that struck my fancy: Iggy, however, had a great dream. What he wanted more than anything else in the world was a golf club, and every cent he could scrape together was deposited in a tin can with a hole punched in its top and its seam bound with bicycle tape.

He would never open the can, but would shake it now and then to estimate its contents. It was his theory that when the can was full to the top it would hold just about enough to pay for the putter he had picked out in the window of Leo's Sporting Goods Store on 86th Street. Two or three times a week he would have me walk with him down to Leo's, so that we could see the putter, and in between he would talk about it at length, and demonstrate the proper grip for holding it, and the way you have to line up a long putt on a rolling green. Iggy Kovac was the first person I knew—I have known many since—who was really golf crazy. But I think that his case was the most unique, considering that at the time he had never in his life even had his hands on a real club.

So that evening, knowing how he felt about it, I said all right, if he wanted to go fish for golf balls I would go with him. It wasn't much of a walk down Bath Avenue; the only hard part was when we entered the course at its far side where we had to climb over mountains of what was politely called "fill." It made hot and smoky going, then there was a swampy patch, and finally the course itself and the water hazard.

I've never been back there since that day, but not long ago I happened to read an article about the Dyker Heights golf course in some magazine or other. According to the article, it was now the busiest public golf course in the world. Its eighteen well-kept greens were packed with players from dawn to dusk, and on week ends you had to get in line at the clubhouse at three or four o'clock in the morning if you wanted a chance to play a round.

Well, each to his own taste, but it

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wasn't like that when Iggy and I used to fish for golf balls there. For one thing, I don't think it had eighteen holes; I seem to remember it as a nine-hole layout. For another thing, it was usually pretty empty, either because not many people in Brooklyn played golf in those days, or because it was not a very enticing spot at best.

The fact is, it smelled bad. They were reclaiming the swampy land all around it by filling it with refuse, and the smoldering fires in the refuse laid a black pall over the place. No matter when you went there, there was that dirty haze in the air around you, and in a few minutes you'd find your eyes smarting and your nose full of a curious acrid smell.

Not that we minded it, Iggy and I. We accepted it casually as part of the scenery, as much a part as the occasional Mack truck loaded with trash that would rumble along the dirt road to the swamp, its chain-drive chattering and whining as it went. The only thing we did mind sometimes was the heat of the refuse underfoot when we climbed over it. We never dared enter the course from the clubhouse side; the attendant there had once caught us in the pond trying to plunder his preserve, and we knew he had us marked. The back entrance may have been hotter, but it was the more practical way in.

When we reached the pond there was no one else in sight. It was a hot, still evening with a flaming-red sun now dipping toward the horizon, and once we had our sneakers and stockings off—long, black cotton stockings they were—we wasted no time wading into the water. It felt good, too, as did the slick texture of the mud oozing up between my toes when I pressed down. I suspect that I had the spirit of the true fisherman in me then. The pleasure lay in the activity, not in the catch.

Still, the catch made a worthy objective, and the idea was to walk along with slow, probing steps, and to stop whenever you felt anything small and solid underfoot. I had just stopped short with the excited feeling that I had pinned down a golf ball in the muck when I heard the sound of a motor moving along the dirt track nearby. My first thought was that it was one of the dump trucks carrying another load to add to the mountain of fill, but then I knew that it didn't sound like a Mack truck.

I looked around to see what kind of car it was, still keeping my foot planted on my prize, but the row of bunkers between the pond and the road blocked my view. Then the sound of the motor suddenly stopped, and that was all I needed to send me splashing out of the water in a panic. All Iggy needed, too, for that matter. In one second we had grabbed up our shoes and stockings and headed around the corner of the nearest bunker where

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we would be out of sight. In about five more seconds we had our stockings and shoes on without even bothering to dry our legs, ready to take flight if anyone approached.

The reason we moved so fast was simply that we weren't too clear about our legal right to fish for golf balls. Iggy and I had talked it over a couple of times, and while he vehemently maintained that we had every right to—there were the balls, with nobody but the dopey caretaker doing anything about it—he admitted that the smart thing was not to put the theory to the test, but to work at our trade unobserved. And I am sure that when the car stopped nearby he had the same idea I did: somebody had reported us, and now the long hand of authority was reaching out for us.

So we waited, crouching in breathless silence against the grassy wall of the bunker, until Iggy could not contain himself any longer. He crawled on hands and knees to the corner of the bunker and peered around it toward the road. "Holy smoke, look at that!" he whispered in an awed voice, and waggled his hand at me to come over.

I looked over his shoulder, and with shocked disbelief I saw a gray Packard, a car with double running-boards, one mounted over the other, the only car of its kind I had ever seen. There was no mistaking it, and there was no mistaking Mr. Rose who stood with two men near it, talking to the smaller one of them, and making angry chopping motions of his hand as he talked.

Looking back now, I think that what made the scene such a strange one was its setting. There was the deserted golf course all around us, and the piles of smoldering fill in the distance, everything seeming so raw and uncitylike and made crimson by the setting sun; and there in the middle of it was this sleek car and the three men with straw hats and jackets and neckties, all looking completely out of place.

Even more fascinating was the smell of danger around them, because while I couldn't hear what was being said I could see that Mr. Rose was in the same mood he had been in when he caught Iggy and me in his driveway. The big man next to him said almost nothing, but the little man Mr. Rose was talking to shook his head, tried to answer, and kept backing away slowly, so that Mr. Rose had to follow him. Then suddenly the little man wheeled around and ran right toward the bunker where Iggy and I were hidden.

We ducked back, but he ran past the far side of it, and he was almost past the pond when the big man caught up with him and grabbed him, Mr. Rose running up after them with his hat in his hand. That is when we could have got away without being seen, but we didn't. We crouched there spellbound, watching something we would nev-

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er have dreamed of seeing—grown-ups having it out right in front of us the way it happens in the movies.

I was, as I have said, twelve years old that summer. I can now mark it as the time I learned that there was a difference between seeing things in the movies and seeing them in real life. Because never in watching the most bruising movie, with Tom Mix or Hoot Gibson or any of my heroes, did I feel what I felt there watching what happened to that little man. And I think that Iggy must have felt it even more acutely than I did, because he was so small and skinny himself, and while he was tough in a fight he was always being outweighed and overpowered. He must have felt that he was right there inside that little man, his arms pinned tight behind his back by the bully who had grabbed him, while Mr. Rose hit him back and forth with an open hand across the face, snarling at him all the while.

"You dirty dog," Mr. Rose said. "Do you know who I am? Do you think I'm one of those lousy small-time bootleggers you double-cross for the fun of it? *This* is who I am!" And with the little man screaming and kicking out at him he started punching away as hard as he could at the belly and face until the screaming and kicking suddenly stopped. Then he jerked his head toward the pond, and his pal heaved the little man right into it headfirst, the straw hat flying off and bobbing up and down in the water a few feet away.

They stood watching until the man in the water managed to get on his hands and knees, blowing out dirty water, shaking his head in a daze, and then without another word they walked off toward the car. I heard its doors slam, and the roar of the motor as it moved off, and then the sound faded away.

All I wanted to do then was get away from there. What I had just seen was too much to comprehend or even believe in; it was like waking up from a nightmare to find it real. Home was where I wanted to be.

I stood up cautiously, but before I could scramble off to home and safety, Iggy clutched the back of my shirt so hard that he almost pulled me down on top of him.

"What're you doing?" he whispered hotly. "Where do you think you're going?"

I pulled myself free. "Are you crazy?" I whispered back. "You expect to hang around here all night? I'm going home, that's where I'm going."

Iggy's face was ashy white, his nostrils flaring. "But that guy's hurt. You just gonna let him stay there?"

"Sure I'm gonna let him stay there. What's it my business?"

"You saw what happened. You think it's right to beat up a guy like that?"

What he said and the way he said

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it in a tight, choked voice made me wonder if he really had gone crazy just then. I said weakly, "It's none of my business, that's all. Anyhow, I have to go home. My folks'll be sore if I don't get home on time."

Iggy pointed an accusing finger at me. "All right, if that's the way you feel!" he said, and then before I could stop him he turned and dashed out of concealment toward the pond. Whether it was the sense of being left alone in a hostile world, or whether it was some wild streak of loyalty that acted on me, I don't know. But I hesitated only an instant and then ran after him.

He stood at the edge of the pond looking at the man in it who was still on his hands and knees and shaking his head vaguely from side to side. "Hey, mister," Iggy said, and there was none of the assurance in his voice that there had been before, "are you hurt?"

The man looked slowly around at us, and his face was fearful to behold. It was bruised and swollen and glassy-eyed, and his dripping hair hung in long strings down his forehead. It was enough to make Iggy and me back up a step, the way he looked.

With a great effort he pushed himself to his feet and stood there swaying. Then he lurched forward, staring at us blindly, and we hastily backed up a few more steps. He stopped short and suddenly reached down and scooped up a handful of mud from under the water.

"Get out of here!" he cried out like a woman screaming. "Get out of here, you little sneaks!"—and without warning flung the mud at us.

It didn't hit me, but it didn't have to. I let out one yell of panic and ran wildly, my heart thudding, my legs pumping as fast as they could. Iggy was almost at my shoulder—I could hear him gasping as we climbed the smoldering hill of refuse that barred the way to the avenue, slid down the other side in a cloud of dirt and ashes, and raced toward the avenue without looking back. It was only when we reached the first street-light that we stopped and stood there trembling, our mouths wide open, trying to suck in air, our clothes fouled from top to bottom.

But the shock I had undergone was nothing compared to what I felt when Iggy finally got his wind back enough to speak up.

"Did you see that guy?" he said, still struggling for breath. "Did you see what they did to him? Come on, I'm gonna tell the cops."

I couldn't believe my ears. "The cops? What do you want to get mixed up with the cops for? What do you care what they did to him, for Pete's sake?"

"Because they beat him up, didn't they? And the cops can stick them in jail for fifty years if somebody tells them, and I'm a witness. I saw what happened and so did you. So you're a witness too."

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I didn't like it. I certainly had no sympathy for the evil-looking apparition from which I had just fled, and, more than that, I balked at the idea of having anything to do with the police. Not that I had ever had any trouble with them. It was just that, like most other kids I knew, I was nervous in the presence of a police uniform. It left me even more mystified by Iggy than ever. The idea of any kid voluntarily walking up to report something to a policeman was beyond comprehension.

I said bitterly, "All right, so I'm a witness. But why can't the guy that got beat up go and tell the cops about it? Why do we have to go and do it?"

"Because he wouldn't tell anybody about it. Didn't you see the way he was scared of Mr. Rose? You think it's all right for Mr. Rose to go around like that, beating up anybody he wants to, and nobody does anything about it?"

Then I understood. Beneath all this weird talk, this sudden access of nobility, was solid logic, something I could get hold of. It was not the man in the water Iggy was concerned with, it was himself. Mr. Rose had pushed *him* around, and now he had a perfect way of getting even.

I didn't reveal this thought to Iggy, though, because when your best friend has been shoved around and humiliated in front of you, you don't want to remind him of it. But at least it put everything into proper perspective. Somebody hurts you, so you hurt him back, and that's all there is to it.

It also made it much easier to go along with Iggy in his plan. I wasn't really being called on to ally myself with some stupid grownup who had got into trouble with Mr. Rose; I was being a good pal to Iggy.

All of a sudden, the prospect of walking into the police station and telling my story to somebody seemed highly intriguing. And, the reassuring thought went, far in back of my head, none of this could mean trouble for me later on, because tomorrow I was moving to Manhattan anyhow, wasn't I?

So I was right there, a step behind Iggy, when we walked up between the two green globes which still seemed vaguely menacing to me, and into the police station. There was a tall desk there, like a judge's bench, at which a gray-haired man sat writing, and at its foot was another desk at which sat a very fat uniformed man reading a magazine. He put the magazine down when we approached and looked at us with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah?" he said. "What's the trouble?"

I had been mentally rehearsing a description of what I had seen back there on the golf course, but I never had a chance to speak my piece. Iggy started off with a rush, and there was no way of getting a word

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in. The fat man listened with a puzzled expression, every now and then pinching his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. Then he looked up at the one behind the tall desk and said, "Hey, sergeant, here's a couple of kids say they saw an assault over at Dyker Heights. You want to listen to this?"

The sergeant didn't even look at us, but kept on writing. "Why?" he said. "What's wrong with your ears?"

The fat policeman leaned back in his chair and smiled. "I don't know," he said, "only it seems to me some guy named Rose is mixed up in this."

The sergeant suddenly stopped writing. "What's that?" he said.

"Some guy named Rose," the fat policeman said, and he appeared to be enjoying himself a good deal. "You know anybody with that name who drives a big gray Packard?"

The sergeant motioned with his head for us to come right up to the platform his desk was on. "All right, kid," he said to Iggy, "what's bothering you?"

So Iggy went through it again, and when he was finished the sergeant just sat there looking at him, tapping his pen on the desk. He looked at him so long and kept tapping that pen so steadily—tap, tap, tap—that my skin started to crawl. It didn't surprise me when he finally said to Iggy in a hard voice, "You're a pretty wise kid."

"What do you mean?" Iggy said. "I *saw* it!" He pointed at me. "He saw it, too. He'll tell you!"

I braced myself for the worst and then noted with relief that the sergeant was paying no attention to me. He shook his head at Iggy and said, "I do the telling around here, kid. And I'm telling you you've got an awful big mouth for someone your size. Don't you have more sense than to go around trying to get people into trouble?"

This, I thought, was the time to get away from there, because if I ever needed proof that you don't mix into grownup business I had it now. But Iggy didn't budge. He was always pretty good at arguing himself out of spots where he was wrong; now that he knew he was right he was getting hot with outraged virtue.

"Don't you believe me?" he demanded. "For Pete's sake, I was right there when it happened! I was this close!"

The sergeant looked like a thundercloud. "All right, you were that close," he said. "Now beat it, kid, and keep that big mouth shut. I got no time to fool around any more. Go on, get out of here."

Iggy was so enraged that not even the big gold badge a foot from his nose could intimidate him now. "I don't care if you don't believe me!" he said. "There's plenty other people'll believe me. Wait'll I tell my father. You'll see!"

I could hear my ears ringing in

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the silence that followed. The sergeant sat staring at Iggy, and Iggy, a little scared by his own outburst, stared back. He must have had the same idea I did then. Yelling at a cop was probably as bad as hitting one, and we'd both end up in jail for the rest of our lives. Not for a second did I feel any of the righteous indignation Iggy did. As far as I was concerned, he had led me into this trap, and I was going to pay for his lunacy. I guess I hated him then even more than the sergeant did.

It didn't help any when the sergeant finally turned to the fat policeman with the air of a man who had made up his mind.

"Take the car and drive over to Rose's place," he said. "You can explain all this to him, and ask him to come along back with you. Oh yes, and get this kid's name and address, and bring his father along, too. Then we'll see."

So I had my first and only experience of sitting on a bench in a police station watching the pendulum of the big clock on the wall swinging back and forth, and recounting all my past sins to myself. It couldn't have been more than a half hour before the fat policeman walked in with Mr. Rose and Iggy's father, but it seemed like a year. And a long, miserable year at that.

The surprising thing was the way Mr. Rose looked. I had half expected them to bring him in fighting and struggling, because while the sergeant may not have believed Iggy's story Mr. Rose would know it was so.

But far from struggling, Mr. Rose looked as if he had dropped in for a friendly visit. He was dressed in a fine summer suit and sporty-looking black and white shoes and he was smoking a cigar. He was perfectly calm and pleasant, and, in some strange way, he almost gave the impression that he was in charge there.

It was different with Iggy's father. Mr. Kovac must have been reading the paper out on the porch in his undershirt, because his regular shirt had been stuffed into his pants carelessly and part of it hung out. And from his manner you'd think that he was the one who had done something wrong. He kept swallowing hard, and twisting his neck in his collar, and now and then glancing nervously at Mr. Rose. He didn't look at all impressive as he did at other times.

The sergeant pointed at Iggy. "All right, kid," he said, "now tell everybody here what you told me. Stand up so we can all hear it."

Since Iggy had already told it twice he really had it down pat now, and he told it without a break from start to finish, no one interrupting him. And all the while Mr. Rose stood there listening politely, and Mr. Kovac kept twisting his neck in his collar.

When Iggy was finished the sergeant said, "I'll put it to you straight

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out, Mr. Rose. Were you near that golf course today?"

Mr. Rose smiled. "I was not," he said.

"Of course not," said the sergeant. "But you can see what we're up against here."

"Sure I can," said Mr. Rose. He went over to Iggy and put a hand on his shoulder. "And you know what?" he said. "I don't even blame the kid for trying this trick. He and I had a little trouble some time back about the way he was always climbing over my car, and I guess he's just trying to get square with me. I'd say he's got a lot of spirit in him. Don't you, sonny?" he asked, squeezing Iggy's shoulder in a friendly way.

I was stunned by the accuracy of this shot, but Iggy reacted like a firecracker going off. He pulled away from Mr. Rose's hand and ran over to his father. "I'm *not* lying!" he said desperately and grabbed Mr. Kovac's shirt, tugging at it. "Honest to God, pop, we both saw it. Honest to God, pop!"

Mr. Kovac looked down at him and then looked around at all of us. When his eyes were on Mr. Rose it seemed as if his collar were tighter than ever. Meanwhile, Iggy was pulling at his shirt, yelling that we saw it, we saw it, and he wasn't lying, until Mr. Kovac shook him once, very hard, and that shut him up.

"Iggy," said Mr. Kovac, "I don't want you to go around telling stories about people. Do you hear me?"

Iggy heard him, all right. He stepped back as if he had been walloped across the face, and then stood there looking at Mr. Kovac in a funny way. He didn't say anything, didn't even move when Mr. Rose came up and put a hand on his shoulder again.

"You heard your father, didn't you, kid?" Mr. Rose said.

Iggy still didn't say anything.

"Sure you did," Mr. Rose said. "And you and I understand each other a lot better now, kiddo, so there's no hard feelings. Matter of fact, any time you want to come over to the house you come on over, and I'll bet there's plenty of odd jobs you can do there. I pay good, too, so don't you worry about that." He reached into his pocket and took out a bill. "Here," he said, stuffing it into Iggy's hand, "this'll give you an idea. Now go on out and have yourself some fun."

Iggy looked at the money like a sleepwalker. I was baffled by that. As far as I could see, this was the business, and here was Iggy in a daze, instead of openly rejoicing. It was only when the sergeant spoke to us that he seemed to wake up.

"All right, you kids," the sergeant said, "beat it home now. The rest of us got some things to talk over."

I didn't need a second invitation. I got out of there in a hurry and went down the street fast, with Iggy tagging along behind me not

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saying a word. It was three blocks down and one block over, and I didn't slow down until I was in front of my house again. I had never appreciated those familiar outlines and the lights in the windows any more than I did at that moment. But I didn't go right in. It suddenly struck me that this was the last time I'd be seeing Iggy, so I waited there awkwardly. I was never very good at saying goodbyes.

"That was all right," I said finally. "I mean Mr. Rose giving you that dollar. That's as good as twenty golf balls."

"Yeah?" said Iggy, and he was looking at me in the same funny way he had looked at his father. "I'll bet it's as good as a whole new golf club. Come on down to Leo's with me, and I'll show you."

I wanted to, but I wanted to get inside the house even more. "Ahh, my folks'll be sore if I stay out too late tonight," I said. "Anyhow, you can't buy a club for a dollar. You'll need way more than that."

"You think so?" Iggy said, and then held out his hand and slowly opened it so that I could see what he was holding. It was not a one dollar bill. It was, to my awe, a five dollar bill.

That, as my wife said, was a long time ago. Thirty-five years before a photograph was taken of little Ignace Kovac, a man wise in the way of the rackets, slumped in a death agony over the wheel of his big car, a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead, a bag of golf clubs leaning against the seat next to him. Thirty-five years before I understood the meaning of the last things said and done when we faced each other on a street in Brooklyn, and then went off, each in his own direction.

I gaped at the money in Iggy's hand. It was the hoard of Croesus, and its very magnitude alarmed me.

"Hey," I said. "That's five bucks. That's a lot of money! You better give it to your old man, or he'll really jump on you."

Then I saw to my surprise that the hand holding the money was shaking. Iggy was suddenly shuddering all over as if he has just plunged into icy water.

"My old man?" he yelled wildly at me, and his lips drew back showing his teeth clenched together hard, as if that could stop the shuddering. "You know what I'll do if my old man tries anything? I'll tell Mr. Rose on him, that's what! Then you'll see!"

And wheeled and ran blindly away from me down the street to his destiny.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ROSS MACDONALD**
TITLE:	***Murder Is a Public Matter***
TYPE:	Detective Novelette
DETECTIVE:	Lew Archer
LOCALE:	San Marcos, California
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Lew Archer, private eye, merely dropped in to see his old war buddy, Hugh Western, a talented artist and a demon with the ladies. But first Lew met a bearded nude . . .*

THE UNLATCHED DOOR SWUNG INward when I knocked. I walked into the studio, which was as high and dim as a hayloft. The big north window in the opposite wall was hung with monk's-cloth drapes that shut out the morning light. I found the switch next to the door and snapped it on. Several fluorescent tubes suspended from the naked rafters flickered and burned blue-white.

A strange woman faced me under the cruel light. She was only a charcoal sketch on an easel, but she gave me a chill. Her nude body, posed casually on a chair, was slim and round and pleasant to look at. But her face wasn't pleasant at all. Bushy black eyebrows almost hid her eyes. A walrus mustache bracketed her mouth, and a thick beard fanned down over her torso.

The door creaked behind me. The girl who appeared in the doorway wore a starched white uniform. Her face had a little starch in it, too, though not enough to spoil her good looks. Her black hair was drawn back severely.

"May I ask what you're doing here?" she said brusquely.

"You may ask. I'm looking for Mr. Western."

"Really? Have you tried looking behind the pictures?"

"Does he spend much of his time there?"

© 1948 by Kenneth Millar; originally titled "The Bearded Lady"

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"No, and another thing he doesn't do—he doesn't receive visitors in his studio when he isn't here himself."

"Sorry. The door was open, so I walked in."

"You can now reverse the process."

"Just a minute. Hugh isn't sick?"

She glanced down at her white uniform, then shook her head.

"Are you a friend of his?" I said.

"I try to be." She smiled slightly. "It isn't always easy, with a sib. I'm his sister."

"Not the one he was always talking about?"

"I'm the only one he has."

I reached back into my mental grab bag of war souvenirs. "Mary. The name was Mary."

"It still is Mary. Are *you* a friend of Hugh's?"

"I guess I qualify. I used to be."

"When?" The question was sharp. I got the impression she didn't approve of Hugh's friends, or some of them.

"In the Philippines. He was attached to my group as a combat artist. My name is Archer, by the way—Lew Archer."

"Oh. Of course."

Her disapproval didn't extend to me—at least, not yet. She gave me her hand. It was cool and firm, and went with her steady gaze.

"Hugh gave me the wrong impression of you," I said, "I thought you were still a kid in school."

"That was four years ago, remember. People grow up in four years. Anyway, some of them do."

She was a very serious girl for her age. I changed the subject. "I saw the announcement of his one-man show in the L.A. papers. I'm driving through to San Francisco, and I thought I'd look him up."

"I know he'll be glad to see you. I'll go and wake him. He keeps the most dreadful hours. Sit down, won't you, Mr. Archer?"

I had been standing with my back to the bearded nude, more or less consciously shielding her from it. When I moved aside and she saw it, she didn't turn a hair.

"What next?" was all she said.

But I couldn't help wondering what had happened to Hugh Western's sense of humor. I looked around the room for something that might explain the ugly sketch.

It was a typical working-artist's studio. The tables and benches were cluttered with things that are used to make pictures: palettes and daubed sheets of glass, sketch pads, scratchboards, bleeding tubes of paint. Pictures in half a dozen mediums and half a dozen stages of completion hung on or leaned against the burlap-covered walls. Some of them looked wild and queer to me, but none so wild and queer as the sketch on the easel.

There was one puzzling thing in the room, besides the pictures. The wooden door frame was scarred with a row of deep round indenta-

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tions, four of them. They were new, and about on a level with my eyes. They looked as if an incredible fist had struck the wood a superhuman blow.

"He isn't in his room," the girl said from the doorway. Her voice was very carefully controlled.

"Maybe he got up early."

"His bed hasn't been slept in. He's been out all night."

"I wouldn't worry. After all, he's an adult."

"Yes, but he doesn't always act like one." A deep feeling buzzed under her calm tone. I couldn't tell if it was fear or anger. "He's twelve years older than I am, and still a boy at heart. A middle-aging boy."

"I know what you mean. I was his unofficial keeper for a while. I guess he's a genius, or pretty close to it, but he needs somebody to tell him to come in out of the rain."

"Thank you for informing me. I didn't know."

"Now don't get peeved at me."

"I'm sorry. I suppose I'm a little upset."

"Has he been giving you a bad time?"

"Not really. Not lately, that is. He's come down to earth since he got engaged to Alice. But he still makes the weirdest friends. He can tell a fake Van Gogh with his eyes shut, literally, but he has no discrimination about people at all."

"You wouldn't be talking about me?"

"No." She smiled again. I liked her smile. "I guess I acted terribly suspicious when I walked in on you. Some pretty dubious characters come to see him."

"Anyone in particular?" I said it lightly. Just above her head I could see the giant fist-mark on the door frame.

Before she could answer, a siren bayed in the distance. She tilted her head. "Ten to one it's for me."

"Police?"

"Ambulance. The police sirens have a different tone. I am an x-ray technician at the hospital, so I've learned to listen for the ambulance. And I'm on call this morning."

I followed her into the hall. "Hugh's show opens tonight. He's bound to come back for that."

She turned at the opposite door, her face brightening. "You know, he may have spent the night working in the gallery. He's awfully fussy about how his pictures are hung."

"Why don't I phone the gallery?"

"There's never anybody in the office till nine." She looked at her unfeminine steel wrist watch. "It's twenty to."

"When did you last see him?"

"At dinner last night. We ate early. He went back to the gallery after dinner. He said he was only going to work a couple of hours."

"And you stayed here?"

"Until about eight, when I was called to the hospital. I didn't get home until quite late, and I thought

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he was in bed." She looked at me uncertainly, with a little wrinkle of doubt between her straight eyebrows. "Could you be cross-questioning me?"

"Sorry. It's my occupational disease."

"What do you do in real life?"

"Isn't this real?"

"I mean now you're out of the Army. Are you a lawyer?"

"A private detective."

"Oh. I see." The wrinkle between her eyebrows deepened.

"But I'm on vacation," I said hopefully.

A phone burred behind her apartment door. She went to answer it, and came back wearing a coat. "It *was* for me. Somebody fell out of a loquat tree and broke a leg. You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Archer."

"Wait a second. If you'll tell me where the art gallery is, I'll see if Hugh's there now."

"Of course, you don't know San Marcos."

She led me to the French windows at the rear end of the hall. They opened on a blacktop parking space which was overshadowed on the far side by a large stucco building, the shape of a flattened cube. Outside the windows was a balcony from which a concrete staircase slanted down to the parking lot. She stepped outside and pointed to the stucco cube.

"That's the gallery. You can take a shortcut down the alley to the front."

A tall young man in a black leotard was polishing a red convertible in the parking lot. He struck a pose, in the fifth position, and waved his hand: "*Bon jour,* Marie."

"*Bon jour,* my phony Frenchman." There was an edge of contempt in her good humor. "Have you seen Hugh this morning?"

"Not I. Is the prodigal missing again?"

"I wouldn't say missing—"

"I was wondering where your car was. It's not in the garage." His voice was much too musical.

"Who's he?" I asked in an undertone.

"Hilary Todd. He runs the art shop downstairs. If the car's gone, Hugh can't be at the gallery. I'll have to take a taxi to the hospital."

"I'll drive you."

"I wouldn't think of it. There's a cabstand across the street." She added over her shoulder, "Call me at the hospital if you find Hugh."

I went down the stairs to the parking lot. Hilary Todd was still polishing the hood of his convertible, though it shone like a mirror. His shoulders were broad and packed with shifting muscle. Some of the ballet boys were strong and could be dangerous. Not that he was a boy, exactly. He had a little round bald spot that gleamed like a silver dollar on the top of his head.

"*Bon jour,*" I said to his back.

"Yes?"

My French appeared to offend his ears. He turned and straight-

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ened. I saw how tall he was—tall enough to make me feel squat, though I was over six feet. He had compensated for the bald spot by growing sideburns. In combination with his liquid eyes they gave him a sort of Latin look.

"Do you know Hugh Western pretty well?"

"If it's any concern of yours."

"It is."

"Now why would that be?"

"I asked the question, sonny. Answer it."

He blushed and lowered his eyes, as if I had been reading his evil thoughts. He stuttered a little. "I—well, I've lived below him for a couple of years. I've sold a few of his pictures. Why?"

"I thought you might know where he is, even if his sister doesn't."

"How should I know where he is? Are you a policeman?"

"Not exactly."

"Not at all, you mean?" He regained his poise. "Then you have no right to take this overbearing attitude. I know absolutely nothing about Hugh. And I'm very busy."

He turned abruptly and continued his polishing job, his fine useless muscles writhing under the leotard.

I walked down the narrow alley which led to the street. Through the cypress hedge on the left I caught a glimpse of umbrella-tables growing like giant multicolored mushrooms in a restaurant patio. In the other side was the wall of the gallery, its white blankness broken by a single iron-barred window above the level of my head.

The front of the gallery was Greek-masked by a high-pillared porch. A broad flight of concrete steps rose to it from the street. A girl was standing at the head of the steps, half leaning on one of the pillars.

She turned toward me, and the slanting sunlight aureoled her bare head. She had a startling kind of beauty: yellow hair, light hazel eyes, brown skin. She filled her tailored suit like sand in a sack—solidly.

"Good morning," I said.

She pretended not to hear. Her right foot was tapping the pavement impatiently. I crossed the porch to the high bronze door and pushed. It didn't give.

"There's nobody here yet," she said. "The gallery doesn't open until ten."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I happen to work here."

"Why don't you open up?"

"I have no key. In any case," she added primly, "we don't allow visitors before ten."

"I'm not a tourist—at least, not at the moment. I came to see Mr. Western."

"Hugh?" She looked at me directly for the first time. "Hugh's not here. He lives around the corner on Rubio Street."

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"I just came from there."

"Well, he isn't here." She gave the word a curious emphasis. "There's nobody here but me. And I won't be here much longer if Dr. Silliman doesn't come."

"Silliman?"

"Dr. Silliman is our curator." She made it sound as if she owned the gallery. After a while she said in a softer voice, "Why are you looking for Hugh? Do you have some business with him?"

"Western's an old friend of mine."

"Really?"

She suddenly lost interest in the conversation. We stood together in silence for several minutes. I watched the Saturday-morning crowd on the street: women in slacks, women in shorts and dirndls, a few men in ten-gallon hats, a few in berets. Nearly half the cars in the road carried out-of-state licenses. San Marcos was a unique blend of western border town, ocean resort, and artists' colony.

A small man in a purple corduroy jacket detached himself from the crowd and bounded up the steps. His movements were quick as a monkey's. His lined face had a simian look, too. A brush of frizzled gray hair added about three inches to his height.

"I'm sorry if I kept you waiting, Alice."

She made a *nada* gesture. "It's perfectly all right. This gentleman is a friend of Hugh's."

He turned to me. His smile went on and off. "Good morning, sir. What was the name?"

I told him. He shook my hand. His fingers were like thin steel hooks.

"Western ought to be here at any minute. Have you tried his flat?"

"Yes. His sister thought he might have spent the night in the gallery."

"Oh, but that's impossible. You mean he didn't come home last night?"

"Apparently not."

"You didn't tell me that," the blonde girl said.

"I didn't know you were interested."

"Alice has every right to be interested." Silliman's eyes glowed with a gossip's second-hand pleasure. "She and Hugh are going to be married. Next month, isn't it, Alice? Do you know Miss Turner, by the way, Mr. Archer?"

"Hello, Mr. Archer." Her voice was shallow and hostile. I gathered that Silliman had somehow embarrassed her.

"I'm sure he'll be along shortly," he said reassuringly. "We still have some work to do on the program for the private showing tonight. Will you come in and wait?"

I said I would.

He took a heavy key ring out of his jacket pocket and unlocked the bronze door, relocking it behind us. Alice Turner touched a switch which lit up the high-ceilinged lobby and the Greek statues standing

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like frozen sentinels along the walls. There were several nymphs and Venuses in marble, but I was more interested in Alice. She had everything the Venuses had, and the added advantage of being alive. She also had Hugh Western, it seemed, and that surprised me. He was a little old for her, and a little used. She didn't look like one of those girls who'd have to settle for an aging bachelor. But then Hugh Western had talent.

She removed a bundle of letters from the mailbox and took them into the office which opened off the lobby. Silliman turned to me with another monkey grin.

"She's quite a girl, isn't she? And she comes from a very good family, an excellent family. Her father, the Admiral, is one of our trustees, you know, and Alice has inherited his interests in the arts. Of course she has a more personal interest now. Had you known of their engagement?"

"I haven't seen Hugh for years—not since the war."

"Then I should have held my tongue and let him tell you himself."

As we were talking he led me through the central gallery, which ran the length of the building like the nave of a church. To the left and right, in what would have been the aisles, the walls of smaller exhibition rooms rose halfway to the ceiling. Above them was a mezzanine reached by an open staircase.

He started up it, still talking. "If you haven't seen Hugh since the war, you'll be interested in the work he's been doing lately."

I was interested though not for artistic reasons. The wall of the mezzanine was hung with twenty-odd paintings: landscapes, portraits, groups of semi-abstract figures, and more abstract still lifes. I recognized some of the scenes he had sketched in the Philippine jungle, transposed into the permanence of oil. In the central position there was a portrait of a bearded man whom I'd hardly have known without the label, *Self-Portrait.*

Hugh had changed. He had put on weight and lost his youth entirely. There were vertical lines in his forehead, gray flecks in his hair and beard. The light-colored eyes seemed to be smiling sardonically. But when I looked at them from another angle, they were bleak and somber. It was a face a man might see in his bathroom mirror on a cold gray hangover morning.

I turned to the curator hovering at my elbow. "When did he raise the beard?"

"A couple of years ago, I believe, shortly after he joined us as resident painter."

"Is he obsessed with beards?"

"I don't quite know what you mean."

"Neither do I. But I came across a funny thing in his studio this morning. A sketch of a woman, a nude, with a heavy black beard.

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Does that make any sense to you?"

The old man smiled. "I've long since given up trying to make sense out of Hugh. He has his own esthetic logic, I suppose. But I'd have to see this sketch before I could form an opinion. He may have simply been doodling."

"I doubt it. It was big, and carefully done." I brought out the question that had been nagging at the back of my mind. "Is there something the matter with him—I mean, emotionally?"

His answer was positive. "Certainly not! He's simply wrapped up in his work, and he lives by impulse. He's never on time for appointments." He looked at his watch. "He promised last night to meet me here this morning at nine and it's almost nine thirty."

"When did you see him last night?"

"I left the key of the gallery with him when I went home for dinner. He wanted to change some of the paintings. About eight or a little later he walked over to my house to return the key. We have only the one key, since we can't afford a watchman."

"Did he say where he was going after that?"

"He had an appointment, but he didn't say with whom. It seemed to be urgent, since he wouldn't stop for a drink. Well." He glanced at his watch again. "I suppose I'd better be getting down to work, Hugh Western or no Hugh Western."

Alice was waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. Both her hands gripped the wrought-iron bannister as if she needed it to hold her up. Her voice was no more than a whisper, but it seemed to fill the great room with leaden echoes.

"Dr. Silliman. The Chardin's gone."

He stopped so suddenly I nearly ran him down. "That's impossible."

"I know. But it's gone, frame and all."

He bounded down the remaining steps and disappeared into one of the smaller rooms under the mezzanine. Alice followed him more slowly. I caught up with her.

"There's a picture missing?"

"Father's best picture, one of the best Chardins in the country. He lent it to the gallery for a month."

"Is it worth a lot of money?"

"Yes, it's very valuable. But it means a lot more to father than the money—" She turned in the doorway and gave me a closed look, as if she'd realized she was telling her family secrets to a stranger.

Silliman was standing with his back to us, staring at a blank space on the opposite wall. He looked badly shaken when he turned around.

"I *told* the Board that we should install a burglar alarm—the insurance people recommended it. But Admiral Turner was the only one who supported me. Now of course they'll be blaming me." His nervous eyes roved around and paused on

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Alice. "And what is your father going to say?"

"He'll be sick." She looked sick herself.

They were getting nowhere, so I cut in, "When did you see it last?"

Silliman answered. "Yesterday afternoon, about five thirty. I showed it to a visitor just before we closed. We check the visitors very carefully from the office, since we have no guards."

"Who was the visitor?"

"A lady—an elderly lady from Pasadena. She's above suspicion, of course. I escorted her out myself, and she was the last one in. I know that for a fact."

"Aren't you forgetting Hugh?"

"By George, I was. He was here until eight last night. But you surely don't suggest that Western took it? He's our resident painter, he's devoted to the gallery."

"He might have been careless. If he was working on the mezzanine and left the door unlocked—"

"He always kept it locked," Alice said coldly. "Hugh isn't careless about the things that matter."

"Is there another entrance?"

"No," Silliman said. "The building was planned for security. There's only the one window in my office, and it's heavily barred. We do have an air-conditioning system, but the inlets are much too small for anyone to get through."

"Let's have a look at the window."

The old man was too upset to question my authority. He led me through a storeroom stacked with old gilt-framed pictures whose painters deserved to be "hung," if the pictures didn't. The single casement in the office was shut and bolted behind a venetian blind. I pulled the cord and peered out through the dusty glass. The vertical bars outside the window were no more than three inches apart. None of them looked as if it had been tampered with. Across the alley I could see a few tourists eating breakfast behind the restaurant hedge.

Silliman was leaning on the desk, one hand on the cradle of the phone. Indecision was twisting his face. "I do hate to call the police in a matter like this. I suppose I must, though, mustn't I?"

Alice covered his hand with hers, the line of her back a taut curve across the desk. "Hadn't you better talk to father first? He was here with Hugh last night—I should have remembered before. It's barely possible he took the Chardin home with him."

"Really? You really think so?" Silliman let go of the telephone and clasped his hands under his chin.

"It wouldn't be like father to do that without letting you know. But the month is nearly up, isn't it?"

"Three more days." His hand returned to the phone. "Is the Admiral at home?"

"He'll be down at the club by now. Do you have your car?"

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"Not this morning."

I made one of my famous quick decisions, the kind you wake up in the middle of the night regretting five years later. San Francisco could wait. My curiosity was touched, and something deeper than curiosity. Something of the responsibility I'd felt for Hugh in the Philippines, when I was the practical one and he was the evergreen adolescent who thought the jungle was as safe as a scene by Le Douanier Rousseau. Though we were nearly the same age, I'd felt like his elder brother. I still did.

"My car's around the corner," I said. "I'll be glad to drive you."

The San Marcos Beach Club was a long low building painted an unobtrusive green and standing well back from the road. Everything about it was unobtrusive, including the private policeman who stood inside the plate-glass doors and watched us come up the walk.

"Looking for the Admiral, Miss Turner? I think he's up on the north deck."

We crossed a tiled lanai shaded with potted palms, climbed a flight of stairs to a sun deck lined with cabanas. I could see the mountains that walled the city off from the desert in the northeast, and the sea below with its waves glinting like blue fish-scales. The swimming pool on the lee side of the deck was still and clear.

Admiral Turner was taking the sun in a canvas chair. He stood up when he saw us, a big old man in shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Sun and wind had reddened his face and crinkled the flesh around his eyes. Age had slackened his body, but there was nothing aged or infirm about his voice. It still held the brazen echo of command.

"What's this, Alice? I thought you were at work."

"We came to ask you a question, Admiral." Silliman hesitated, coughing behind his hand. He looked at Alice.

"Speak out, man. Why is everybody looking so green around the gills?"

Silliman forced the words out. "Did you take the Chardin home with you last night?"

"I did not. Is it gone?"

"It's missing from the gallery," Alice said. She held herself uncertainly, as though the old man frightened her a little. "We thought you might have taken it."

"Me take it? That's absurd! Absolutely absurd and preposterous!" The short white hair bristled on his head. "When was it taken?"

"We don't know exactly. It was gone when we opened the gallery."

"Damn it, what's going on?" He glared at her, then he glared at me from eyes like round blue gun muzzles. "And who the hell are you?"

He was only a retired admiral, and I'd been out of uniform for years; still he gave me a qualm.

Alice explained: "A friend of Hugh's, Father. Mr. Archer."

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He didn't offer his hand. I looked away. A woman in a white bathing suit was poised on the ten-foot board at the end of the pool. She took three quick steps and a bounce. Her body hung jackknifed in the air, straightened and dropped, then cut the water with hardly a splash.

"Where is Hugh?" the Admiral said petulantly. "If this is some of his carelessness, I'll ream that son-of-a—"

"Father!"

"Don't father me. Where is he, Allie? You ought to know if anyone does."

"But I don't." She added in a small voice, "He's been gone all night."

"He has, has he?" The old man sat down suddenly, as if his legs were too weak to bear the weight of his emotions. "He didn't say anything to me about going away."

The woman in the white bathing suit came up the steps behind him. "Who's gone?" she said.

The Admiral craned his wattled neck to look at her. She was worth the effort from anyone, though she wouldn't see thirty again. Her dripping body was tanned and disciplined, full in the right places and narrow in the others. I didn't remember her face, but her shape seemed familiar. Silliman introduced her as Admiral Turner's wife. When she pulled off her rubber cap, her red hair flared like a minor conflagration.

"You won't believe what they've been telling me, Sara. My Chardin's been stolen."

"Which one?"

"I only have one. The *Apple on a Table.*"

She turned on Silliman like a pouncing cat. "Is it insured?"

"For twenty-five thousand dollars. But I'm afraid it's irreplaceable."

"And who's gone?"

"Hugh," Alice said. "Of course it's nothing to do with the picture."

"You're sure?" She turned to her husband with an intensity that made her almost ungainly. "Hugh was at the gallery when you dropped in there last night. You told me so yourself. And hasn't he been trying to buy the Chardin?"

"I don't believe it," Alice said flatly. "He didn't have the money."

"I know that perfectly well," Sara said. "He was acting as agent for someone. Wasn't he, Johnston?"

"Yes," the old man admitted. "He wouldn't tell me who his principal was, which is one of the reasons I wouldn't listen to the offer. Still, it's foolish to jump to conclusions about Hugh. I was with him when he left the gallery, and I know for a fact he didn't have the Chardin then. It was the last thing I looked at before we left."

"What time did he leave you?"

"Some time around eight—I don't remember exactly." He seemed to be growing older and smaller under her questioning. "He walked with me as far as my car."

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"There was nothing to prevent him from walking right back, was there?"

"I don't know what you're trying to prove," Alice said.

The older woman smiled poisonously. "I'm simply trying to bring out the facts, so we'll know what to do. I notice that no one has suggested calling the police." She looked at each of the others in turn. "Well? Do we call them? Or do we assume as a working hypothesis that dear Hugh took the picture?"

Nobody answered her for a while. The Admiral finally broke the ugly silence. "We can't bring in the authorities if Hugh's involved. He's virtually a member of the family."

Alice put a grateful hand on his shoulder, but Silliman said uneasily, "We'll have to take some steps. If we don't make an effort to recover it, we may not be able to collect the insurance."

"I realize that," the Admiral said. "But we'll have to take that chance."

Sara Turner smiled with tight-lipped complacency. She'd won her point, though I still wasn't sure what her point was. During the family argument I'd moved a few feet away, leaning on the railing at the head of the stairs.

She moved toward me now, her narrow eyes appraising me as if maleness was a commodity she prized.

"And who are you?" she said, her sharp smile widening.

I identified myself, but I didn't smile back. She came up very close to me. I could smell the chlorine on her, and under it the not so very subtle odor of sex.

"You look uncomfortable," she said. "Why don't you come swimming with me?"

"My hydrophobia won't let me. Sorry."

"What a pity. I hate to do things alone."

Silliman nudged me gently. He said in an undertone, "I really must be getting back to the gallery. I can call a cab if you prefer."

"No, I'll drive you." I wanted a chance to talk to him in private.

There were quick footsteps in the patio below. I looked down and saw the partly naked crown of Hilary Todd's head. At almost the same instant he glanced up at us, turned abruptly, and started to walk away; then he changed his mind when Silliman called down:

"Hello there. Are you looking for the Turners?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

From the corner of my eye I noticed Sara Turner's reaction to the sound of his voice. She stiffened, and her hand went up to her flaming hair.

"They're up here," Silliman said.

Todd climbed the stairs with obvious reluctance. We passed him going down. In a pastel shirt and matching tie under a bright tweed jacket he looked very elegant, and very self-conscious and tense. Sara

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Turner met him at the head of the stairs. I wanted to linger a bit, but Silliman hustled me out.

"Mrs. Turner seems very much aware of Todd," I said to him in the car. "Do they have things in common?"

He answered tartly, "I've never considered the question. They're no more than casual acquaintances, so far as I know."

"What about Hugh? Is he just a casual acquaintance of hers, too?"

He studied me for a minute as the convertible picked up speed. "You notice things, don't you?"

"Noticing things is my business."

"Just what is your business? You're not an artist?"

"Hardly. I'm a private detective."

"A detective?" He jumped in the seat, as if I had threatened to bite him. "You're not a friend of Western's then? Are you from the insurance company?"

"Not me. I'm a friend of Hugh's, and that's my only interest in this case. I more or less stumbled into it."

"I see." But he sounded a little dubious.

"Getting back to Mrs. Turner, she didn't make that scene with her husband for fun. She must have had reason. Love or hate?"

Silliman held his tongue for a minute, but he couldn't resist the chance to gossip. "I expect it's a mixture of love and hate. She's been interested in Hugh ever since the Admiral brought her here. She's not a San Marcos girl, you know." He seemed to take comfort from that. "She was a Wave officer in Washington during the war. The Admiral noticed her—Sara knows how to make herself conspicuous—and added her to his personal staff. When he retired he married her and came here to live in his family home. Alice's mother has been dead for many years. Well, Sara hadn't been here two months before she was making eyes at Hugh." He pressed his lips together in spinsterly disapproval. "The rest is local history."

"They had an affair?"

"A rather one-sided affair, so far as I could judge. She was quite insane about him. I don't believe he responded, except in the physical sense. Your friend is quite a demon with the ladies." There was a whisper of envy in Silliman's disapproval.

"But I understood he was going to marry Alice."

"Oh, he is, he is. At least he certainly was until this dreadful business came up. His—ah—involvement with Sara occurred before he knew Alice. She was away at art school until a few months ago."

"Does Alice know about his affair with her stepmother?"

"I suppose she does. I hear the two women don't get along at all well, though there may be other reasons for that. Alice refuses to live in the same house—she's moved into the gardener's cottage behind the Turner house. I think her trou-

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ble with Sara is one reason why she came to work for me. Of course, there's the money consideration, too. The Turners aren't well off."

"I thought they were rolling in it," I said, "from the way he brushed off the matter of the insurance. Twenty-five thousand dollars, did you say?"

"Yes. He's quite fond of Hugh."

"If he's not well heeled, how does he happen to have such a valuable painting?"

"It was a gift, when he married his first wife. Her father was in the French Embassy in Washington, and he gave them the Chardin as a wedding present. You can understand the Admiral's attachment to it."

"Better than I can his decision not to call in the police. How do you feel about that, Doctor?"

He didn't answer for a while. We were nearing the center of the city and I had to watch the traffic. I couldn't keep track of what went on in his face.

"After all it *is* his picture," he said carefully. "And his prospective son-in-law."

"You don't think Hugh's responsible, though?"

"I don't know what to think. I'm thoroughly confused. And I won't know what to think until I have a chance to talk to Western." He gave me a sharp look. "Are you going to make a search for him?"

"Somebody has to. I seem to be elected."

When I let him out in front of the gallery, I asked him where Mary Western worked.

"The City Hospital." He told me how to find it. "But you will be discreet, Mr. Archer? You won't do or say anything rash? I'm in a very delicate position."

"I'll be very suave and bland." But I slammed the door hard in his face.

There were several patients in the x-ray waiting room, in various stages of dilapidation and disrepair. The plump blonde at the reception desk told me Miss Western was in the dark room. Would I wait? I sat down and admired the way her sunburned shoulders glowed through her nylon uniform. In a few minutes Mary came into the room, starched and controlled and efficient-looking. She blinked in the strong light from the window. I got a quick impression that there was a lost child hidden within her.

"Have you seen Hugh?" she asked.

"No. Come out for a minute." I took her elbow and drew her into the corridor.

"What is it?" Her voice was quiet but it had risen in pitch. "Has something happened to him?"

"Not *to* him. Admiral Turner's picture's been stolen from the gallery. The one they all call the Chardin."

"But how does Hugh come into this?"

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"Somebody seems to think he took it."

"Somebody?"

"Mrs. Turner, to be specific."

"Sara! She'd say anything to get back at him for ditching her."

I filed that one away. "Maybe so. The fact is, the Admiral seems to suspect him, too. So much so that he's keeping the police out of it."

"Admiral Turner is a senile fool. If Hugh were here to defend himself—"

"But that's the point. He isn't."

"I've got to find him." She turned toward the door.

"It may not be so easy."

She looked back in quick anger, her round chin prominent. "You suspect him, too."

"I do not. But a crime's been committed, remember. Crimes often come in pairs."

She turned, her eyes large and very dark. "You *do* think something has happened to my brother."

"I don't think anything. But if I was certain that he's all right, I'd be on my way to San Francisco now."

"You believe it's as bad as that," she said in a whisper. "I've got to go to the police."

"It's up to you. You'll want to keep them out of it, though, if there's the slightest chance—" I left the sentence unfinished.

She finished it: "That Hugh is a thief? There isn't. But I'll tell you what we'll do. He may be up at his shack in the mountains. He's gone off there before without telling anyone. Will you drive up with me?" She laid a light hand on my arm. "I can go myself if you have to get away."

"I'm sticking around," I said. "Can you get time off?"

"I'm taking it. All they can do is fire me, and there aren't enough good technicians to go around. Anyway, I put in three hours overtime last night. Be with you in two minutes."

I put the top of the convertible down. As we drove out of the city the wind blew away her smooth glaze of efficiency, colored her cheeks, and loosened her sleek hair.

"You should do this oftener," I said.

"Do what?"

"Get out in the country and relax."

"I'm not exactly relaxed, with my brother accused of theft—and missing."

"Anyway, you're not working. Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps you work too hard?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that somebody has to work or nothing will get done? You and Hugh are more alike than I thought."

"In some ways that's a compliment. But you make it sound like an insult."

"I didn't mean it that way. But Hugh and I are so different. I admit he works hard at his painting, but he's never tried to make a steady living. Since I left school, I've had

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to look after the bread and butter for both us. His salary as resident painter keeps him in artist's supplies, and that's about all."

"I thought he was doing well. His show's had a big advance buildup in the L.A. papers."

"Critics don't buy pictures," she said bluntly. "He's having the show to try and sell some paintings, so he can afford to get married. Hugh has suddenly realized that money is one of the essentials." She added with some bitterness, "The realization came a little late."

"He's been doing some outside work, though, hasn't he? Isn't he a part-time agent or something?"

"For Hendryx, yes." She made the name sound like a dirty word. "I'd just as soon he didn't take any of that man's money."

"Who's Hendryx?"

"A man."

"I gathered that. What's the matter with his money?"

"I really don't know. I have no idea where it comes from. But he has it—plenty of it."

"You don't like him?"

"No. I don't like him and I don't like the men who work for him. They look like a gang of thugs to me. But Hugh wouldn't notice that. He's horribly dense where people are concerned. I don't mean that Hugh's done anything wrong," she added quickly. "He's bought a few paintings for Hendryx on commission."

"I see." But I didn't like what I saw. "The Admiral said something about Hugh trying to buy the Chardin for an unnamed purchaser. Would that be Hendryx?"

"It could be," she said.

"Tell me more about Hendryx."

"I don't know any more. I only met him once. That was enough. I know that he's an evil old man, and he has a bodyguard who carries him upstairs."

"Carries him upstairs?"

"Yes. He's crippled. As a matter of fact, he offered me a job."

"Carrying him upstairs?"

"He didn't specify my duties. He didn't get that far." Her voice was so chilly it quick-froze the conversation. "Now could we drop the subject, Mr. Archer?"

The road had begun to rise toward the mountains. Yellow and black Slide Area signs sprung up along the shoulders. By holding the gas pedal nearly to the floor, I kept our speed around fifty.

"You've had quite a busy morning," Mary said after a while, "meeting the Turners and all."

"Social mobility is my stock in trade."

"Did you meet Alice, too?"

I nodded.

"And what did you think of her?"

"I shouldn't say it to another girl, but she's a lovely one."

"Vanity isn't one of my vices," Mary said. "She's beautiful. And she's really devoted to Hugh."

"I gathered that."

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"I don't think Alice has ever been in love before. And painting means almost as much to her as it does to him."

"He's a lucky man." I remembered the disillusioned eyes in Hugh's self-portrait, and hoped his luck was holding.

The road twisted and climbed through red clay cut banks and fields of dry chaparral.

"How long does this go on?" I asked.

"Another two miles."

We zigzagged up the mountainside for ten or twelve minutes more. Finally the road began to level out. I was watching its edge so closely that I didn't see the cabin until we were almost on top of it. It was a one-story frame building standing in a little hollow at the edge of the high mesa. Attached to one side was an open tarpaulin shelter from which the rear end of a gray coupe protruded. I looked at Mary.

She nodded. "It's our car." Her voice was bright with relief.

I stopped the convertible in the lane in front of the cabin. As soon as the engine died, the silence began. A single hawk high over our heads swung round and round on his invisible wire. Apart from that, the entire world seemed empty. As we walked down the ill-kept gravel drive, I was startled by the sound of my own footsteps.

The door was unlocked. The cabin had only one room. It was a bachelor hodgepodge, untouched by the human hand for months at a time. Cooking utensils, paint-stained dungarees, painter's tools, and soiled bedding were scattered on the floor and furniture. There was an open bottle of whiskey, half empty, on the kitchen table in the center of the room. It would have been just another mountain shack if it hadn't been for the watercolors on the walls, like brilliant little windows, and the one big window which opened on the sky.

Mary had crossed to the window and was looking out. I moved up to her shoulder. Blue space fell away in front of us all the way down to the sea, and beyond to the curved horizon. San Marcos and its suburbs were spread out like an air-map between the sea and the mountains.

"I wonder where he can be," she said. "Perhaps he's gone for a walk. After all, he doesn't know we're looking for him."

I looked down the mountainside, which fell almost sheer from the window.

"No," I said. "He doesn't."

The red clay slope was sown with boulders. Nothing grew there except a few dust-colored mountain bushes . . . and a foot, wearing a man's shoe, which projected from a cleft between two rocks.

I went out without a word. A path led round the cabin to the edge of the slope. Hugh Western was there, attached to the solitary foot. He was lying, or hanging,

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head down, with his face in the clay, about twenty feet below the edge. One of his legs was doubled under him. The other was caught between the boulders. I climbed around the rocks and bent down to look at his head.

The right temple was smashed. The face was smashed—I raised the rigid body to look at it. He had been dead for hours, but the sharp strong odor of whiskey still hung around him.

A tiny gravel avalanche rattled past me. Mary was at the top of the slope.

"Don't come down here."

She paid no attention to the warning. I stayed where I was, crouched over the body, trying to hide the ruined head from her. She leaned over the boulder and looked down, her eyes bright-black in her drained face. I moved to one side. She took her brother's head in her hands.

"If you pass out," I said, "I don't know whether I can carry you up."

"I won't pass out."

She lifted the body by the shoulders to look at the face. It was a little unsettling to see how strong she was. Her fingers moved gently over the wounded temple. "This is what killed him. It looks like a blow from a fist."

I kneeled down beside her and saw the row of rounded indentations in the skull.

"He must have fallen," she said, "and struck his head on the rocks. Nobody could have hit him that hard."

"I'm afraid somebody did, though." Somebody whose fist was hard enough to leave its mark in wood.

(*continued on page 60*)

NEXT MONTH . . .

New stories by

HUGH PENTECOST

FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

AARON MARC STEIN

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**GEORGE HARMON COXE**
TITLE:	***There's Still Tomorrow***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Alan Marsh
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*There's absolutely no question about it: it's dangerous for a pretty girl to take a shower in a strange man's apartment . . .*

THE RAIN THAT HAD BEEN THREATening all afternoon hit the city streets at four thirty, just as Alan Marsh left the taxi. A quick dive took him across the sidewalk to the shelter of the street-level entrance with no more than a few rain spots on his jacket; and then, finding the glass-paneled outer door unlocked, as Tom Bennett had said it would be, he started climbing to the second floor.

Here twin doors faced each other across the narrow hall. Alan put his overnight bag next to the one on the left, then continued to the broom closet at the rear. He found the key on the rim of the casing over the door, unlocked the apartment, and returned the key to its hiding place before he entered.

The narrow living room seemed pleasantly comfortable after the September heat that had been blanketing the northeast, and when he had slipped out of his jacket he took his suitcase into the bedroom. It was then that he heard the shower going in the adjoining bath. This surprised him for a moment but an explanation soon came to him and now, stepping up, he opened the bathroom door.

"Hey, Tom," he called.

But as he started to enter he stiffened, his mouth half open, and his gaze shocked and incredulous when it fastened on the girl.

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Somehow his body recoiled even while he began to apologize. He got the bathroom door closed and stood clinging to the knob, his breath caught and sudden tension holding his body still. His first impulse was to get out of there *fast*. What stopped him was the intuitive certainty that something was horribly wrong.

He could still hear the drumming of the shower spray on the half-open curtain and the picture he had seen remained vivid in his mind: the pretty girl on her knees, her head, shoulders, and arms folded into the tub as though in an attitude of prayer, her nakedness complete except for the yellow plastic shower cap.

As his imagination rounded out the picture he felt sure she must have slipped and fallen. Suppose she was badly hurt? Or suppose she was merely stunned, and when he went back to help she started screaming? He shivered unconsciously, and because his intuitive fears remained more powerful than the personal risk, he opened the bathroom door again, cautiously and not very far.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Are you all right?"

When there was no answer he widened the gap. He moved tentatively forward, his eyes busy as they took in the bra, panties, and robe on the bathstool, the towel which lay nearby. The girl's knees were centered in a small pool of water and there was a second pool nearer the stool. A heavy glass bottle of some toilet preparation, unbroken and with the cap still on, had dropped near the radiator.

The girl did not stir when he called again and he reached through the spray to turn off the water, first the hot, then the cold. His sleeve was soaked to the elbow when the silence finally came, and he wiped his wet hand on his trousers before he touched the girl's shoulder. The soft skin was moist and warm and now, with the spray no longer rinsing the yellow cap, he saw a thin trickle of blood behind one ear.

Again some impulse told him to get out—and he obeyed it until he reached the living room. There he stopped and tried to bring some order to the chaos in his mind. When he had called Tom Bennett from Boston the night before, Tom had said he would be in Philadelphia for the day and would not be back until early evening. So who was the girl and what was she doing in Tom's bathroom?

Finding no answers, his mind probed backward, to his last trip to New York. That was a month ago. He'd learned then that Tom's marriage was shaky, that his wife had gone to the Cape for the summer, not as an official trial separation but simply to give them both a chance to take stock and measure certain values. He had no thought that Tom had been playing around

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but it was during that trip that he had learned about the three girls in the first floor apartment.

The one he had met briefly—her name was Mary Jordan—had so impressed him that he had written Tom to see if he could fix up a date. When he had phoned last night Tom told him he was all set. But the girl in the bathroom was not Mary Jordan.

Suddenly he knew he could not run out. The girl might be badly hurt, she might even be dead. That she needed help was more important than his own awkward predicament, so he turned to the telephone near the front windows. Because he knew no doctors, he dialed the operator and asked for the police.

Outside the rain had slackened somewhat and the late afternoon sun had begun to finger the cornices of the building across the street and bring the promise of a pleasant evening. He thought regretfully of his date as he hung up, then caught his breath and wheeled toward the door.

He had heard the scratch of a key, the click of the bolt. The woman who entered was humming softly as she replaced the key in her oversized handbag. She was a smallish, deeply tanned woman in a beige, tropical-weight suit that was smartly tailored. She did not see him until she had closed the door; then the humming stopped and she gasped audibly.

"Hello, Mrs. Bennett," Alan said quickly. "I'm Alan Marsh. We met last spring, remember?"

He saw with relief the gleam of recognition in the dark eyes. One hand touched her bosom as her body relaxed, and she offered a tentative smile.

"Oh—yes. Of course I remember. You startled me. I didn't think—is Tom here?"

Alan said no and explained his presence. "Didn't Tom know you were coming?" he asked.

"No. I flew down this afternoon. I thought I'd spend the night, do some shopping in the morning, and then fly back." She hesitated, head tipping, her gaze speculative. "Why? I mean—you look so strange. Is something wrong?"

"There's a girl in the bathroom. She's bleeding."

"A girl? What girl? *Bleeding?*"

"I don't know who she is, Mrs. Bennett." He explained how he had come in and what he had seen. "Will you look at her, please?"

She was moving before he finished, tossing her bag on the sofa and striding quickly through the bedroom. When she reappeared a few moments later, her small face was pale and her eyes were troubled.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

She shook her head. "There are three girls on the first floor," she said. "They moved in about a week before I left for the Cape. I never actually met them and this could

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be one of them but why—" She broke off, her tone rising. "Why would she be taking a bath *here?*" Then, as though expecting no answer, she asked, "Have you called a doctor?"

"I don't know a doctor," Alan said. "I called the police."

He moved to the hall door and listened. When he heard someone on the stairs he turned the knob and saw them climbing up, two uniformed officers, apparently from a radio car. After they had glanced about the room they looked at the woman, then back at Alan.

"You the one who called in?"

"What's the trouble?" the second one said.

He told them and they started for the bathroom, one going in, the other waiting at the doorway. Presently the second one turned and asked for the telephone. When he had his number he spoke in clipped phrases and by the time he had finished his partner was back. He took off his cap and scratched thick, graying hair. He tucked the cap under his arm and found a notebook in one of his pockets.

"You live here?"

"No," Alan said.

"It's my apartment," Ethel Bennett said. "I'm Mrs. Bennett."

"Is there a Mr. Bennett?"

He asked other questions and then looked at Alan. "How'd you get your sleeve wet?"

"When I saw she was unconscious I turned off the shower."

"That's all you did?" He nodded when Alan replied, then said, "There'll be someone here from the precinct in a minute, so you might as well sit down and wait."

The reinforcements consisted of a middle-aged lieutenant named Porter and a younger, black-browed man who was introduced as Detective Hagan. There was a conference as the uniformed men filled Porter in and then withdrew. There was a second conference when the doctor came and the verdict was that the girl was alive but badly hurt.

"That laceration is superficial," the doctor said, "and I don't think she just fell. I think she was hit, either by a fist or maybe one of those toilet bottles. The glass is heavy and probably wouldn't break —your lab men should be able to tell."

"But she fell after she was hit," Lieutenant Porter said.

"Oh, she fell all right. The way her pupils react to light I'd say there was a hemorrhage, possibly subdural. The only thing to do is get her to a hospital and in the hands of a neuro-surgeon."

"When'll she be conscious?"

"An hour, a week—maybe never." The doctor slipped on his jacket. "If she regains consciousness she'll have a fighting chance."

The ambulance men arrived as he finished and he gave them instructions before they went into the bathroom. Then the apartment

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door opened and a plainclothesman came in with a slender, neatly rounded girl with medium-blonde hair and dark-blue eyes. Alan could not see the color from where he sat but he still remembered those eyes from his first meeting. He started to rise, but thought better of it as the plainclothesman said, "This is Miss Jordan, Lieutenant. I stopped her when she came in. She has an apartment on the first floor—"

He broke off as the ambulance men came from the bedroom with a blanket-covered stretcher. Only the pale face was exposed and Mary Jordan uttered a small frightened cry as she saw it.

"Lois!" she said, glancing helplessly from the lieutenant to the doctor. "What happened? What's wrong with her?"

The doctor spoke comfortingly as the ambulance attendants left the room with the stretcher. He said Lois had had a bad fall and that it was important to get her to the hospital as soon as possible. As she stood helplessly, the tears welling up in her eyes, Alan stepped up and touched her arm.

"I found her, Mary. I heard the shower and thought it was Tom Bennett."

She recognized him but was too choked up to reply. The lieutenant said to Alan, "You know each other?"

Alan nodded, and Porter spoke thoughtfully to the girl. He said he knew how upset she must feel but that he'd have to ask some questions.

"Perhaps you can help us," he said. "Why don't you sit down?"

He motioned toward the sofa as Alan took her arm. She went quietly. Alan sat down with her and Ethel Bennett moved over; they watched Mary open her handbag and take out a handkerchief.

"What's the rest of her name, Miss Jordan?" Porter said. "Lois what?"

"Lois Carey."

"She was your roommate?"

"One of them."

"And what was she doing in this apartment?"

"Why—taking a bath."

"I know," Porter said patiently. "But why? Is your bathtub out of order?"

"Oh," the girl said understandingly. "Yes, it is." She dabbed at her eyes and swallowed to clear her throat. "The drain got plugged up."

"When was this?"

"Wednesday night. We talked to the janitor the next morning—"

"That was yesterday."

"—but as usual he was drunk. Maybe not drunk, but tipsy. We could never get him to do anything. He said he'd look after it but it probably wouldn't get fixed before Monday." She blew her nose and said, "We were arguing in the front hall when Mr. Bennett came down on his way to work and he said

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why didn't we use his bathroom."

"You were friendly with Mr. Bennett?"

"We thought he was very nice."

"Did any of you go out with him?"

"No." Her glance slid sideways to Ethel Bennett. "We knew he was married. But we had to bathe somewhere and he always ate dinner before he came home and he said he'd leave a key over the broom closet and if we were out of his place by seven thirty and brought our own towels we could use his bath. So we did. Last night anyway. And Lois—well, she must have got off early this afternoon and—"

She hesitated as a new thought came to her and her eyes regarded him with suspicion.

"Why does it matter?" she asked. "If Lois slipped—"

"It may not be that simple," Lieutenant Porter cut in. "We think someone struck her first—someone who walked in on her."

"I don't believe it!"

Porter ignored the protest and spoke of the other tenants.

"The Mannings have the whole third floor," Mary said, "but they're on vacation. Mr. Davis—he's a writer—lives across the hall, and Mr. King has the apartment opposite us."

Porter thought it over. "Did you ever date either Davis or King?"

Mary hesitated, her gaze still troubled. "Lois did. She went out with Mr. Davis a few times. But not lately."

"She stopped seeing him, huh? Do you know why? Did they have a fight?"

"I don't think there was any fight. She just decided she didn't want to see him any more. She said he was—well, difficult."

"What about King?"

"We never went out with him."

"Did he ask any of you?"

"Constantly."

"Any special reason you refused?"

"Oh"—she tipped one hand—"none of us happened to like him, that's all. We thought he was a sort of pest, always trying to get one of us in for a drink. He'd keep his door ajar and pop into the hall if he heard one of us come in or out."

Porter turned to Ethel Bennett. "Do you know either Davis or King?"

Mrs. Bennett had unbuttoned the jacket of her immaculate suit and had been following the questions with interest. She had smoked her cigarette nearly down to the filter and now she leaned forward to stub it out.

"I know Mr. Davis," she said. "He moved in over a year ago. I'm not sure about the other one." She glanced at Mary. "Small, wears glasses, getting bald? . . . Yes, I've seen him," she said to Porter, "but I don't know him."

Porter drew Hagan to one side and spoke softly. When Hagan nod-

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ded and went out, Porter pulled at one ear and considered Mary thoughtfully.

"You say that King had his door ajar frequently," he said. "This talk with Mr. Bennett about using the bath here was in the hall downstairs, right? King could have heard you, *right?*"

"I suppose so."

"This guy across the hall—here on the second floor—he might have seen one or the other of you come in here. What I mean is, I don't think anyone just *walked* in here." He stopped to study Alan. "Unless it was you. You're sure you got that wet sleeve turning off the shower and not reaching for her."

His tone suggested this was a routine question rather than an accusation. Alan said, "I told you what I did."

The reappearance of Hagan stopped further discussion, and with him was a tall, well-built man with a crew cut. He might have been thirty and he was clad in wrinkled khaki trousers, slippers, and a colorfully patterned sports shirt. He wore it outside his trousers and it gaped above the single button that fastened it, revealing a hairy chest.

"This is Davis from across the hall, Lieutenant," Hagan said and ducked out again.

Alan followed the lieutenant's questions, aware that if the prodding disturbed Davis the writer did not show it. He admitted having dated Lois Carey, admitted annoyance when she refused to see him any more. He said he normally made his own meals because he was not, as yet, a very successful writer; he had not been out of his apartment that day and no, he certainly had not been in this apartment at any time.

Hagan came back as Davis finished, shaking his head. "Nothing over there that's wet, Lieutenant."

Again Hagan withdrew and now Alan understood the dominant idea in Porter's mind. So did Davis.

"If somebody dragged Lois out of that shower, or into it," he said, "he'd have to get wet. I don't have anything wet."

"You could have taken your shirt off first," Porter said. "It would be the smart thing to do . . . Go over there and sit down," he said and jerked a thumb at a chair in the corner.

When Hagan returned he was accompanied by a small, wiry-looking man with thinning brown hair that was fast receding, dark-rimmed glasses, and a small mustache. His face was angular and narrow, and Alan, recalling what Mary had said, could understand why most women might think him unattractive.

"This is King," Hagan said. He took the coat and trousers of a light-weight blue suit from his arm and put them on the table. "I found these in a closet. They're still pretty damp."

Porter told King what had hap-

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pened. "You might as well come clean," he said. "The girl isn't dead and it's just a question of time before she fingers you anyway."

"I don't know anything about it."

Porter pretended he had not heard. "You've been making a pest of yourself. The girls kept brushing you off. It burned, didn't it? Finally got under your skin. You overheard the bathroom deal between Mr. Bennett and the girls and you knew where the key would be. This afternoon you saw Miss Carey come up here in her robe and underwear and you waited just long enough for her to get into the shower."

King wet his lips and his mustache twitched. "I've never been in this place before."

"How'd you get your suit wet?"

"It was raining when I came home."

"When was that?"

"About twenty-five of five."

"Very convenient, that rain. How're you so sure of the time?"

"I got a cab just as the rain started. It was four thirty then and it was only a five minute drive."

"You rode in a cab, yet you got soaked?"

"The driver had to double park outside. It was raining hard then. I got wet just getting from the cab to the front door."

The lieutenant was not impressed. Neither was Alan. Part of his mind had been occupied with other things as King told his story and somehow the obvious conclusion did not quite fit the facts as he knew them. Before he could put his fingers on the discrepancies the door opened again. This time the man who entered had a bulky equipment case and from what Lieutenant Porter said, it was apparent the newcomer was a specialist in fingerprints, photography, or both. On impulse Alan leaned forward.

"It's getting sort of crowded here, Lieutenant. Couldn't Miss Jordan and I wait for you in her place?"

Porter gave him a long, steady look that seemed to weigh not only the question but also his character. Such direct inspection brought a flush to Alan's cheeks and he said, "I'm not going to run out."

"I know you're not. I've got a man at the door." Porter shrugged and took a breath. "Okay. I'll see you later."

Alan took Mary's hand as they left the Bennett apartment. She made no comment while they were going down the stairs. Her apartment door was unlocked and he followed her into a small sitting room. The furniture looked secondhand but the room was neat and homey, and when the girl dropped wearily on the studio couch he sat down beside her and offered a cigarette.

"You don't smoke?" he asked when she shook her head.

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"Sometimes. But only a few a day."

He lit his own and dropped the match into the glass ashtray beside the single butt that lay there. She did not look at him but sat very still, her hands limp in her lap, her head slightly bowed, her loveliness all the more appealing. He understood how distressed she was and wanted to comfort her, but did not know how.

Because of what had happened upstairs the evening he had planned had been washed out. Unless the lieutenant found a solution, there might be hours of questioning in some grubby precinct station. This thought depressed him even more and so, still goaded by the thought that had come to him upstairs—that somehow the conclusions drawn from the facts were not quite right—he began to question Mary about the third roommate.

Her name was Sally something-or-other and she had gone to Connecticut for the week-end, leaving the girls' apartment early and taking her bag to the office so she could go directly to the station after work. When silence settled on them again he asked how they divided the household duties.

"I do the cooking," Mary said, and this time she managed a small smile. "They talked me into thinking I'm best at it . . . and I really don't mind. Just dinners—breakfast is sort of everyone-for-herself—and they take turns with the dishes. We all pitch in to clean house, generally Saturday mornings, and we take turns dusting this room and tidying it up before we go to work."

When she saw he did not understand she explained, "We like to leave this room neat because sometimes one of us will bring someone in after work for a drink, and mornings are the only time we can be sure it will look all right."

"Who did it this morning?"

"I did. Does it look all right?"

"It looks fine."

He hesitated, wondering how he could get at this thing that kept bothering him. The half-formed notion in his mind nagged and nagged at him, and because it would not let go, he said, "Was Lois what you'd call a nice girl?"

"Of course she was!" Mary said indignantly.

"All right." Alan grinned at her. "I'm not just asking for curiosity's sake. I—well, I have a reason for wanting to know. Did she smoke?"

"No."

"Drink?"

"A little. I never saw her take more than two. And I never saw her high."

"Boy friends?"

"I've met two or three. She wasn't in love with anyone if that's what you're driving at."

"The door must have been unlocked when he came in. You see that, don't you?"

"Naturally. Lois unlocked it. She was early—probably the office let

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her out because of the heat—and she wanted a shower, so she undressed and put on a robe. My goodness, she only expected to be gone five or ten minutes!"

The door opened and Ethel Bennett stepped into the room. "The Lieutenant said I could wait here too," she said. "May I join you?"

She came forward, leaving the door open. She took a chair opposite Alan, found a filter-tipped cigarette in her bag, and when she had it lit offered some words of sympathy to Mary. Alan let her finish but his mind was still working—and now an odd and unaccountable excitement was beginning to stir in him.

"Lois was draped over the tub," he said, continuing to talk to Mary. "There was a little water on the floor by her knees. There was another puddle off to one side . . . Suppose," he said, "that you'd been taking the shower and some man had walked in on you. What would you have done?"

"I would have yelled at him to get out."

"And if he didn't? If he had started to reach for you?"

"I—I guess I would have screamed."

"What else?"

"I'd grab the shower curtain around me and pull back."

"Sure. But if it was a *woman* you wouldn't have to be quite so modest. You might step out and reach for the towel."

"But—there was no woman."

"I think there was." Alan looked at Ethel Bennett. She still held the cigarette but her eyes were now half closed. "Wasn't there, Mrs. Bennett?"

For another long second her narrowed gaze held his. Then she laughed, an abrupt disdainful sound.

"I haven't the faintest idea of what you're talking about."

"I think you have," Alan said. "The shower curtain was pulled aside, as though Lois had done it. I think she stepped out to talk to you—otherwise there would have been no second puddle on the floor."

The woman started to reply and then her gaze slid beyond him. When Alan's head came round, Lieutenant Porter was in the doorway.

"You got any facts to back up that idea, Mr. Marsh?" the lieutenant snapped.

Alan swallowed as Porter advanced and then, knowing he could not quit now, his jaw tightened. "A couple of things." He took a breath and said, "Mrs. Bennett didn't come in when she said she did."

"How did you know that?"

"It was still raining when I called the police. Not as hard but hard enough to spot up a suit of that color." He glanced at the woman and the still immaculate beige suit. "There were no spots, so I say she came here *before* I did, before the rain started. I think she walked in

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on the girl, not knowing who she was or why she should be there, and lost her head. I think Lois stepped out of the tub to explain and never got a chance."

"Go ahead," Porter said when Alan paused. "Then what?"

"I don't know whether she hit Lois with the bottle that was on the floor, but Lois fell, and before Mrs. Bennett could get out she heard me unlock the door."

He explained how he had replaced the key before entering. He said, "She stepped into a closet and ducked out when I went into the bedroom. But when she reached the front door she saw she was trapped. It was pouring. If she walked out she'd be soaked; she'd be conspicuous. And I think there was something else, even more important. If King told the truth I think he arrived at just that time. There's a glass panel in the outer door and when she saw him get out of the cab and cross the walk she had no place to go—no place but to come here into this apartment. This door was unlocked because Lois left it that way and that gave Mrs. Bennett the break she needed. She stayed here until she got her nerves under control and then—it was still raining—she played it cool and walked in on me."

"What utter rot!" Ethel Bennett had leaned forward, cheekbones white, her mouth stiff. "He can't accuse me like that, Lieutenant. If you don't—"

"Just a minute, Mrs. Bennett." Porter thought it over. "It could have happened that way," he said finally. "If you could *prove* she came here—*to this apartment.* Can you, Mr. Marsh?"

Alan pointed to the single cigarette butt in the glass ashtray. He spoke quickly of the housekeeping habits in the girls' apartment and how Mary had cleaned the room that morning.

"Lois Carey doesn't smoke. Mary never had a chance to come in this afternoon because your man stopped her. So how did that cigarette butt get there? Can a laboratory expert tell if the lipstick on that filter tip is the same as the one Mrs. Bennett is smoking and the one she smoked upstairs?"

"They can do better than that," Lieutenant Porter said. "They can even do things with saliva tests." He looked at the woman, then walked over to salvage the cigarette butt. "If you smoked this, Mrs. Bennett the thing for you to do is tell the truth and then pray that that girl in the hospital doesn't die."

That challenge broke the woman's icy reserve and her face crumbled. While Alan sat close to Mary, the words tumbled out and they listened as Ethel Bennett told how she had found Lois, how sudden and unreasoning jealousy had gripped her and destroyed her capacity to think. Even when Lois had stepped from the tub and tried

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to explain, the emotional blindness had persisted. She had tried to strike out in her fury but Lois, who was larger and stronger, held her off. In desperation then, she had reached for the bottle and struck, and the girl had fallen against the edge of the tub.

Porter heard her out before he stepped into the hall and called Hagan. "We'll have to go down to the precinct house," he said. "We'll need some statements." He glanced at Alan and Mary. "For you two it shouldn't take too long."

Alan turned to Mary. He took her hands and she let him hold them. He said that when the statements had been given they would need a drink and they had to eat sometime, didn't they?

"And afterwards," he said, "we can go to the hospital and see how Lois is doing. She'll make it—I'm sure she will. And there's still tomorrow for us, isn't there?"

She had been watching him as he spoke and the dark-blue eyes were soft with understanding as she nodded.

"Yes, Alan," she said. "There's still tomorrow."

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THE MURDER MEMOIRS OF JONAS P. JONAS

THE CASE OF THE BLUE BOWL

by E. X. FERRARS

"Well, if you aren't interested in murder," said my husband's uncle, Jonas P. Jonas, "perhaps you're interested in birds."

By then I knew him well enough to recognize the gambit. Even if the story that was coming began with birds, it would not take long to get to the bloodshed.

In his retirement Uncle Jonas lived on nostalgic memories of crime and criminals, and the hope that some day he might convert these memories into something more substantial to live on. But for this he needed the assistance of someone with the habit of putting words on paper, and ever since I had married into the family he had been trying in all sorts of ways to overcome my resistance to accepting the part of collaborator.

"The extraordinary thing about birds is the way they learn things," he went on craftily. "Look at the way they learned about milk bottles. When I was a boy you could leave a milk bottle on the doorstep all day, but what happens if you do that now? Some bird pounces on it the minute it's been put down, jabs its beak through the top, and guzzles up the cream. Isn't that amazing? Wouldn't you like to know about the first bird that thought of doing it?"

"Yes, I think I should," I said. "Can you tell me?"

"Oh, I don't mean that *I* know," Uncle Jonas said. "I don't even know when it first began to happen. But I remember when I first heard about it. It was when I was investigating the disappearance of Emily Toombs, the old woman who'd apparently remembered to stop the milk before she vanished but forgotten to stop the newspapers . . .

"No, don't worry, my dear, it's the birds I want to tell you about, not the murder. I know it's the birds that'll interest you most, because the murder was just a sordid affair of a poor old woman killed for the imaginary thousands she was supposed to have sewn up in her mattress. They weren't there, of course, but you know how that sort of story gets around.

"Old Mrs. Toombs lived alone in a rather poor sort of cottage, and she used to be visited from time to time by a nephew who arrived in an expensive car and wore expensive clothes. They weren't prepared in the village to believe that it was just because he was fond of her. As it turned out, they were quite right

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about that too. The nephew had other excellent reasons.

"It was the nephew who brought me into the case. He came into my office one day and asked me to go down at once to this village. He couldn't go himself, he said, because there was an important sale coming off at Sotheby's. He was an antique dealer, he told me, and he didn't want to mess up his own affairs if, in fact, there was nothing wrong. But he was anxious about his aunt, because he'd just been rung up by one of her neighbors who'd told him that no one had seen the old woman around for a week, and she hadn't stopped her newspapers or left a forwarding address at the post office.

"She *had* stopped her milk, however. She'd left a little note on the doorstep, saying, 'No More Milk Till Further Notice.' So it was a mystery what had actually happened to her, and as she wasn't in the habit of going away, people were beginning to talk.

"Well, I drove down to the village, went to the cottage, and took a look around. The windows were small and all covered up with lace curtains, so you couldn't see in; but you could see in through the slit of the letter-box in the front door, and there on the floor just inside was a heap of newspapers and letters which had plainly been piling up for days.

"When I'd seen that, I went round to the back door and there I found the notice she'd put out to stop the milk. The milkman hadn't removed it, and though there'd been rain once or twice that week it was still quite clear. It was written in pencil in block letters, and it was on the doorstep with a little blue bowl upside down on it to keep it there.

"That's to say, that is what I thought the bowl was there for. It was a pretty thing, a sort of earthenware, and, as I said, a nice shade of blue, and I wondered why she'd used it when she could have used a bit of stick or a stone.

"At that point I thought it was fairly clear that there wasn't much to worry about. She'd just gone away for a holiday, I thought, and hadn't stopped the papers because she'd like to look at them when she got home. But still it seemed to me I'd better call on the neighbor who'd rung up the nephew. So I went along, and there on her doorstep, beside an empty milk bottle waiting to be collected next day, I saw a teacup, an old cracked teacup.

"I was a bit puzzled, so when the woman came to the door I said, 'Would you mind telling me why you keep that teacup on your doorstep?' It was then I learned about the birds."

Uncle Jonas grinned at me. "Perhaps you thought I'd forgotten about the birds; but I've just been putting in the background to help explain how I first heard that nowadays, the modern bird being what it is, you always have to leave out

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a cup or a bowl or something for the milkman to put on top of the milk bottle to stop the little beggars getting at the milk.

"'Amazing,' I said to the neighbor, when she'd explained it. She said, 'It's just evolution,' and then she went on to say that she felt in her bones that poor old Mrs. Toombs had been murdered, and that it was her nephew who'd done it, because, as anyone could see, he was after the thousands sewn up in Mrs. Toombs's mattress.

"Well, while she was talking about that, I went on thinking about the birds, and as soon as I could get away, I went straight back to Mrs. Toombs's cottage, I took another look at the little blue bowl, and then I looked carefully all round, and I found two other very interesting things on the ground nearby.

"I found a splinter of broken glass, as if from a broken milk bottle, and I found the handle of a teacup, a very ordinary sort of cheap white teacup.

"So then I asked myself why a woman who normally used a cheap white teacup to keep the birds out of the milk should put out such a pretty little blue bowl instead particularly if she was going away for just a week or so.

"I stood there thinking for a minute or two. Then I went and got some of the neighbors and the village constable, and we broke into the cottage. And as I expected, we found Mrs. Toombs inside, with her head battered in. And we found that the mattress on her bed had been slit up, and all the cushions slashed to ribbons, and so on.

"The neighbors all said that it was bound to happen sometime, and that it was the nephew who'd done it. I told them it was the nephew who'd sent me down to find out what had happened to his aunt, but they thought that was just his cunning. Besides, they said, he'd been down to visit his aunt just before she vanished.

"That worried me. But still I somehow couldn't believe that the man who'd come to see me in my office, a man who ran an antique business in London, would have made a mistake like putting that little blue bowl out on the doorstep. Only someone very ignorant, I thought, could have failed to notice that it wasn't just a cheap piece of pottery, but something rather special.

"So I told the neighbors what I thought, and about what had really happened, and as a result the police arrested the milkman, and he was tried and hanged for the murder."

I asked Uncle Jonas, "Why the milkman?"

"Because of the birds," he said. "There'd always been a cup out on the doorstep for him to pop on top of the milk bottle when he delivered it, and he wanted things to go on looking just as usual. But when

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Mrs. Toombs opened the door and reached for the milk, he smashed an empty milk bottle down on her head and she dropped the cheap white cup she'd always used, and it got broken.

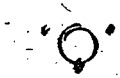
"That wouldn't do, he thought. A notice stopping the milk, to explain why he hadn't mentioned to anyone that the bottles weren't being taken in, and an old cup or bowl as usual on the doorstep—that was what was needed. So he scribbled a note to himself and he looked around in the cottage for some old bowl to put out with it.

"Well, he found an old one all right—about a thousand years old. It was something called Chün ware, I learned later. 'The blue of the sky after rain,' is what the Chinese call the nice color that I liked so much. But he didn't find any money. It was the nephew who got all that."

"But you said she hadn't any, Uncle Jonas," I protested.

"I said nothing of the kind," he replied tartly. "I said there wasn't any in the mattress. It was on the walls and the floors, in the drawers and the cupboards—thousands of pounds worth of furniture and china and silver. She'd been a well-known antique dealer in her time, and she taught her nephew, so he told me, everything he knew. He still came to her whenever he wanted advice, and always went by what she said. He missed her very much, and gave her a very expensive funeral.

"But I still think it's extraordinary about the birds. How did the first one find out about the milk bottles, and how did he pass it on to the others?"



NEXT MONTH . . .

AGATHA CHRISTIE

QUENTIN REYNOLDS

JOHN COLLIER

and an unfamiliar story by

A. CONAN DOYLE

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ARTHUR GORDON**

TITLE: ***The Moonlight Gunner***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Are you a duck hunter? Then you'll like this story particularly . . . You say you don't shoot ducks? Then perhaps you'll like this story even more . . .*

AT FIVE THIRTY, JUST AS THE SKY was beginning to lighten in the east, he saw the yellow lights of the car coming across the causeway. For a moment he stood there, his breath steaming in the icy air. Then he slapped his gloved hands together, bent, and spun the flywheel. The boat's engine caught with a sputtering roar. He throttled it back. So she hadn't changed her mind. So she was coming after all. Good.

He swung his booted legs over the gunwale, feeling the skim ice break like glass. He moved up the beach, onto the road. He stood there, face knifed into the wind. He had no patience with baymen who hired themselves out as duck guides. He had made it a rule never to do it himself. But there was an exception to every rule. In this case, the exception was female, blonde, and eager.

He waited, turning the thought over in his mind. Himself, Jed Clayton, and one good-looking dame alone in a duck blind in the middle of nowhere. It could be an interesting morning. Very.

A hundred yards away, the car turned into the narrow road, its headlights scything through the dark. Odd, really, the way she had found him. Two afternoons ago. Just called him out of the tavern where he had been having a couple

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of beers. "You're Jed Clayton, aren't you?" Her eyes were gray and level. "How about taking me gunning one morning this week?"

He had stared at her, sitting there behind the wheel of the car. She looked more like a fashion model than a duck hunter. He said, "Why pick on me?"

She said, "I like to hunt. They tell me you know more about the bay and the birds than anybody. Will you take me?"

He had rasped one hand across his chin, trying to size her up, trying to make up his mind. "You and who else?"

"Nobody else. Just myself." She hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Won't that be enough?"

He flicked a glance at her ringless hands. "Sure," he said. "Plenty, Miss . . ."

"You can call me Diana," the girl had said.

They had settled on a price. He had told her where to meet him, and now he was here.

The car eased up beside him and pulled off the road. The girl got out, her face a silver blur under her cap. Hunting clothes made some women look bulky and unattractive. Not this one. He said, "So you made it. I was afraid maybe you wouldn't."

She said, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

From the car she took a gun in a sheepskin case and handed it to him. Twenty-gauge: he could tell by the weight. She passed him an oblong metal shell-box and a canvas thermos-container. She closed the car door and said, "All right. Let's go."

"I'll put these aboard, then come back for you. Otherwise you'll get wet."

She shivered a little, then shook her head. "I have boots," she replied. "I'll wade."

They headed out into the choppy, steel-colored waters of the bay. He pulled up the canvas spray-hood. Even so, it was cold. The girl sat on the engine-box, bracing herself as the boat bucked.

Light was pouring into the sky now. Ahead of them a raft of broadbill took off with a frantic flurry of wings. High overhead a wedge of canvasback went by. The girl watched them, saying nothing.

He studied the girl, checking his course now and then. She seemed calm enough, but there was something guarded, something wary about her. Was she trying to attract him or wasn't she? Take it easy, he said to himself; there's plenty of time.

The island rose out of the bay, a strip of marsh and sand dunes, nothing more. The blind he planned to use was a narrow pit dug into the frozen mud at the south end. It contained a wooden bench and a shelf for shell-boxes. Nothing else. But cozy enough, he thought; out of the wind, out of sight . . .

He eased the boat into a cove

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formed by two projecting arms of marsh grass. "You can get set in the blind," he told the girl. "I'll rig out some decoys, then take the boat down the beach a way. Better load up—you might get a shot before I join you."

She nodded, picking up her gun and shell-box. He watched her tramp through the frost-rimed grass, come to the blind, and lower herself into it. There was nothing, then, but the immensity of sea and marsh and sky. But she was there. She would stay there until he joined her. There was nowhere for her to go.

He kicked the boat into reverse, swung out into the channel, and rigged a dozen decoys in front of the blind. Usually he rigged more, but not today, not with this impatience in him. Then he headed for a creek two hundred yards away where the grass grew tall.

As he made the boat fast, he heard the flat bark of the girl's twenty-gauge. He looked up in time to see a pintail come hurtling out of the sky and thud into the marsh behind the blind. A long shot. Very. She could handle a gun, all right.

He opened a locker and hesitated, staring at his own guns. In the end he chose a double-barreled twelve-gauge, ignoring the automatics. Maybe the girl would want to do all the shooting. Well, he would let her call the shots . . . for a while.

He found her standing in the far corner of the blind, the twenty-gauge cradled in her arms, shell-box on the shelf in front of her, the dead pintail on the bench. The sun had cleared the horizon by now, and her face was golden in the tawny light. He dropped down into the other corner. "I brought your thermos bottle. Want some coffee?"

She nodded. He put his gun down, unscrewed the thermos cap, and poured two plastic cups full of steaming liquid. He handed one to the girl and raised the other. "Here's to us!"

He drank, but she did not. She put the cup carefully down on the shelf. Her face seemed pale, but perhaps it was just the cold. He said, "That was a good shot you made just now. Have you hunted much?"

"I used to," she said. "But not this year. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "I kill a lot of ducks. Every year."

"So they told me. Ever have any trouble with game wardens?"

He paused in the act of raising the cup. "No."

Her gray eyes swept the marsh, then the channel where the decoys bobbed solemnly, finally the blinding sun path on the water. "Wasn't it somewhere out here that they found the body of that warden last year?"

Over the rim of the cup, he watched her. "They found him on another island, about a mile from

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here. Fellow named Torgesson, or something like that. Silly fool had managed to shoot himself."

"His gun had been fired, it's true. But I don't think he shot himself."

"No?"

"No. I think you shot him."

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowed against the blast of light. He kept his voice soft, almost casual. "Why on earth would I want to do a thing like that?"

"Because he caught you slaughtering ducks on the water at night. You're a market gunner, aren't you? Drift down on a raft of ducks in the moonlight with two automatics and you might get forty, fifty birds. That's the sort of thing Torgesson was paid to prevent."

He made himself laugh softly. "You must be crazy. I always gun around this island. Torgesson's body was found a mile from here."

"It went where the wind and the current took it. I know. I checked the drift a dozen times this past summer. I've done some checking on you, too. I know the places you sell your illegal birds. I know you were out in the bay the night Torgesson was killed. I know he planned to set a trap for somebody who was night-gunning ducks . . . Don't move!"

He had reached for his twelve-gauge, but the twin muzzles of the twenty were staring straight into his face. He bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. "Who was Torgesson? Your boy friend?"

"He . . ."

Cat-quick, he flung the coffee in her face, lunged, twisted the shotgun away from her, and slammed her back against the wall of the blind. He said through his teeth, "Next time you try to hold a gun on me, sister, take the safety catch off first!"

The anger in him exploded and he slapped her three times in the face with his gloved hand. The impact of the third blow left her huddled in the corner.

"Sure, I did it! Sure, I killed your snooping lover-boy! But you'll never prove it, and neither will anyone else!"

She did not answer him. She lay there, motionless, gray eyes watching him, a trickle of blood from a split lip moving slowly down her chin.

Abruptly he controlled himself. "What are you trying to do? Make me so mad that I'll kill you too? Well, it won't work. Get up. We're going back!"

She said nothing. All the way back across the bay she said nothing. He did not return her gun, and she did not ask for it. When the keel grated on the sand, she took her shell-box and the thermos bag and waded ashore.

But before she reached her car, two men moved out from behind it, their shadows long on the sand. The Sheriff was unarmed, but his deputy carried a .38 negligently in one hand.

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Jed Clayton came splashing ashore quickly. "Sheriff," he said, "this dame is crazy. Tried to shoot me out there! Accused me of all sorts of . . ."

"Shut up, you!" the Sheriff said. "Well, Mrs. Torgesson?"

"It's all right," the girl said. "It worked out all right."

"Listen!" yelled Jed Clayton. "You got no proof, none of you! My word's as good as hers! My word . . ."

But then he was silent, because the girl had placed her shell-box on the sand. She opened its perforated lid, reached inside, and abruptly Jed Clayton heard his own voice, recorded but unmistakeable.

"I brought your thermos bottle. Want some coffee? A pause. Then, *"Here's to us!"*

The girl switched the mechanism off. She said, "You'll find the rest of it on the tape, Sheriff. A full confession."

"No," said Jed Clayton hoarsely. "No!"

The girl looked at him for a long moment, her bruised face expressionless. Then she turned away. The deputy tapped his prisoner gently with the long blue barrel of the .38.

"Come on, Clayton," he said. "You're a dead duck."

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MURDER IS A PUBLIC MATTER

by ROSS MACDONALD

(continued from page 38)

Two long hours later I parked my car in front of the art shop on Rubio Street. Its windows were jammed with Impressionist and Post-Impressionist reproductions, and one very bad original oil of surf as stiff and static as whipped cream. The sign above the windows was lettered in flowing script: *Chez Hilary*. The cardboard sign on the door was simpler and to the point. It said: *Closed*.

The stairs and hallway seemed dark, but it was good to get out of the sun. The sun reminded me of what I had found at high noon on the high mesa. It wasn't the middle of the afternoon yet, but my nerves felt stretched and scratchy, as though it were late at night. And my eyes were aching.

Mary unlocked the door of her apartment, stepped aside to let me pass. She paused at the door of her room to tell me there was whiskey on the sideboard. I offered to make her a drink. No, thanks, she never drank. The door shut behind her. I mixed a whiskey and water and tried to relax in an easy chair. But I couldn't relax. My mind kept playing back the questions and the answers—and the questions that had no answers.

We had called the sheriff from the nearest fire warden's post, led him and his deputies back up the mountain to the body. Photographs were taken, the cabin and its surroundings searched, and many questions were asked. Mary didn't mention the Chardin. Neither did I.

Some of the questions were answered after the county coroner arrived. Hugh Western had been dead since eight or ten o'clock the previous night; the coroner couldn't place the time more definitely before analyzing the stomach contents. The blow on the temple had killed him. The injuries to his face, which had failed to bleed, had probably been inflicted after death. Which meant that he was dead when his body fell—or was thrown—down the mountainside.

His clothes had been soaked with whiskey to make it look like a drunken accident. But the murderer had gone too far in covering, and had outwitted himself. The whiskey bottle in the cabin showed no fingerprints, not even Western's. And there were no fingerprints on the steering wheel of his coupe. Bottle and wheel had been wiped clean.

I stood up when Mary came back into the room. She had brushed her black hair gleaming, and changed to a dress of soft black jersey which fitted her like skin. A thought raced through my mind like a nasty little rodent. I wondered what she would look like with a beard.

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"Can I have another peek at the studio? I'm interested in that sketch."

She stared at me for a moment, frowning a little dazedly. "Sketch?"

"The one of the lady with the beard."

She crossed the hall ahead of me, walking slowly and carefully as if the floor was unsafe. The door of the studio was still unlocked. She held it open for me and pressed the light switch.

When the fluorescent lights blinked on, I saw that the picture of the bearded nude was gone. There was nothing left of her but four torn corners of drawing paper thumbtacked to the easel.

I turned to Mary. "Did you take it down?"

"No. I haven't been in the studio since this morning."

"Somebody's stolen it then. Is there anything else missing?"

"I can't be sure, it's such a mess in here." She moved around the room looking at the pictures on the walls and pausing finally by a table in the corner. "There was a bronze cast on this table. It isn't here now."

"What sort of cast?"

"The cast of a fist. Hugh made it from the fist of that man—that dreadful man I told you about."

"What dreadful man?"

"I think his name is Devlin. He's Hendryx' bodyguard. Hugh's always been interested in hands, and the man has enormous hands."

Her eyes unfocused suddenly. I guessed she was thinking of the same thing I was: the marks on the side of Hugh's head, which might have been made by a giant fist.

"Look." I pointed to the scars on the door frame. "Could the cast of Devlin's fist have made these marks?"

She felt the indentations with trembling fingers. "I think so." She turned to me with a dark question in her eyes.

"If that's what they are," I said, "it probably means that he was killed in this studio. You should tell the police about it. And I think it's time they knew about the Chardin."

She gave me a look of passive resistance. Then she gave in. "Yes, I'll have to tell them. They'll find out soon enough, anyway. But I'm surer now than ever that Hugh didn't take it."

"What does the picture look like? If we could find it, we might find the killer attached to it."

"You think so? Well, it's a picture of a little boy looking at an apple. Wait a minute—Hilary has a copy. It was painted by one of the students at the college, and it isn't very expert. It'll give you an idea, though, if you want to go down to his shop and look at it."

"The shop is closed."

"He may be there anyway. He has a little apartment at the back."

I started for the hall, but turned before I got there. "Just who is Hilary Todd?"

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"I don't know where he's from originally. He was stationed here during the war, and simply stayed on. His parents had money at one time, and he studied painting and ballet in Paris, or so he claims."

"Art seems to be the main industry in San Marcos."

"You've just been meeting the wrong people."

I went down the outside stairs to the parking lot. Todd's convertible stood near the mouth of the alley. I knocked on the back door of the art shop. There was no answer, but behind the venetian-blinded door I heard a murmur of voices—a growling and a twittering. Todd had a woman with him. I knocked again.

After more delay the door was partly opened. Todd looked out through the crack. He was wiping his mouth with a red-stained handkerchief. The stains were too bright to be blood. Above the handkerchief his eyes were bright and narrow, like slivers of polished agate.

"Good afternoon."

I moved forward as though I fully expected to be let in. He opened the door reluctantly under the nudging pressure of my shoulder, backed into a narrow passage between two wallboard partitions.

"What can I do for you, Mr.—? I don't believe I know your name."

Before I could answer, a woman's voice said clearly, "It's Mr. Archer, isn't it?"

Sara Turner appeared in the doorway behind him, carrying a highball glass and looking freshly groomed. Her red hair was unruffled, her red mouth gleaming as if she had just finished painting it.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Turner."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Archer." She leaned in the doorway, almost too much at ease. "Do you know Hilary, Mr. Archer? You should. Everybody should. Hilary's simply loaded and dripping with charm, aren't you, dear?" Her mouth curled in a thin smile.

Todd looked at her with open hatred, then turned to me without changing his look. "Did you wish to speak to me?"

"I did. You have a copy of Admiral Turner's Chardin?"

"A copy, yes."

"Can I have a look at it?"

"What on earth for?"

"I want to be able to identify the original. It's probably connected with the murder."

I watched them both as I said the word. Neither showed surprise.

"We heard about it on the radio," the woman said. "It must have been dreadful for you."

"Dreadful," Todd echoed her, injecting synthetic sympathy into his dark eyes.

"Worse for Western," I said, "and for whoever did it. Do you still think he stole the picture, Mrs. Turner?"

Todd glanced at her sharply. She was embarrassed, as I'd intended her to be. She dunked her embar-

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rassment in her highball glass, swallowing deeply from it and leaving a red half moon on its rim.

"I never thought he stole it," her wet mouth lied. "I merely suggested the possibility."

"I see. Didn't you say something about Western trying to buy the picture from your husband? That he was acting as agent for somebody else?"

"I wasn't the one who said that. I didn't know it."

"The Admiral said it then. It would be interesting to know who the other man was. He wanted the Chardin, and it looks to me as if Hugh Western died because somebody wanted the Chardin."

Todd had been listening hard and saying nothing. "I don't see any connection," he said. "But if you'll come in and sit down I'll show you my copy."

"You wouldn't know who it was that Western was acting for?"

He spread his palms outward in a Continental gesture. "How would I know?"

"You're in the picture business."

"I *was* in the picture business." He turned abruptly and left the room.

Sara Turner had crossed to a portable bar in the corner. She was splintering ice with a silver-handled ice pick. "May I make you one, Mr. Archer?"

"No, thanks." I sat down in a cubistic chair designed for people with square corners, and watched her take half of her fresh highball in a single gulp. "What did Todd mean when he said he *was* in the picture business? Doesn't he run this place?"

"He has to give it up. The *boutique's* gone broke, and he's going around testing shoulders to cry on."

"Yours?" A queer kind of hostile intimacy had risen between us, and I tried to make the most of it.

"Where did you get that notion?"

"I thought he was a friend of yours."

"Did you?" Her laugh was too loud to be pleasant. "You ask a great many questions, Mr. Archer."

"They seem to be indicated. The cops in a town like this are pretty backward about stepping on people's toes."

"You're not."

"No. I'm just passing through. I can follow my hunches."

"What do you hope to gain?"

"Nothing for myself. I'd like to see justice done."

She sat down facing me, her knees almost touching mine. They were pretty knees, and uncovered. I felt crowded. Her voice, full of facile emotion, crowded me more.

"Were you terribly fond of Hugh?" she asked.

"I liked him." My answer was automatic. I was thinking of something else: the way she sat in her chair with her knees together, her body sloping backward, sure of its firm lines. I'd seen the same pose in charcoal that morning.

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"I liked him too," she was saying. "Very much. And I've been thinking—I've remembered something. Something that Hilary mentioned a couple of weeks ago—about Walter Hendryx wanting to buy the Chardin. It seems Hugh and Walter Hendryx were talking in the shop—"

She broke off suddenly. She had looked up and seen Todd leaning through the doorway, his face alive with anger. His shoulders moved slightly in her direction. She recoiled, clutching her glass. If I hadn't been there, he would have hit her. As it was, he said in monotone, "How cozy. Haven't you had quite a bit to drink, Sara darling?"

She was afraid of him, but unwilling to admit it. "I have to do something to make present company bearable."

"You should be thoroughly anesthetized by now."

"If you say so, darling."

She hurled her half-empty glass at the wall beside the door. It shattered, denting the wallboard and splashing a photograph of Nijinsky as the Faun. Some of the liquid splattered on Todd's blue suede shoes.

"Very nice," he said. "I love your girlish antics, Sara. I also love the way you run at the mouth." He turned to me. "This is the copy, Mr. Archer. Don't mind her, she's just a weensy bit drunky."

He held it up for me to see, an oil painting about a yard square showing a small boy in a blue waistcoat sitting at a table. In the center of the linen tablecloth there was a blue dish containing a red apple. The boy was looking at the apple as if he intended to eat it. The copyist had included the signature and date: *Chardin, 1744.*

"It's not very good," Todd said, "if you've ever seen the original. But of course you haven't?"

"No."

"That's too bad. You probably never will now, and it's really perfect. Perfect. It's the finest Chardin west of Chicago."

"I haven't given up hope of seeing it."

"You might as well, old boy. It'll be well on its way by now, to Europe or South America. Picture thieves move fast, before the news of the theft catches up with them and spoils the market. They'll sell the Chardin to a private buyer in Paris or Buenos Aires, and that'll be the end of it."

"Why 'they'?"

"Oh, they operate in gangs. One man can't handle the theft and disposal of a picture by himself. Division of labor is necessary, and specialization."

"You sound like a specialist yourself."

"I am in a way." He smiled obliquely. "Not in the way you mean. I was in museum work before the war."

He stopped and propped the picture against the wall. I glanced at

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Sara Turner. She was hunched forward in her chair, still and silent, her hands spread over her face.

"And now," he said to me, "I suppose you'd better go. I've done what I can for you. And I'll give you a tip if you like. Picture thieves don't commit murder—they're simply not the type. So I'm afraid your precious hypothesis is based on bad information."

"Thanks very much," I said. "I certainly appreciate that. Also your hospitality."

"Don't mention it."

He raised an ironic brow, and turned to the door. I followed him out through the deserted shop. Most of the stock seemed to be in the window. Its atmosphere was sad and broken-down—the atmosphere of an empty-hearted, unprosperous, second-rate Bohemia. Todd didn't look around like a proprietor. He had already abandoned the place in his mind, it seemed.

He unlocked the front door. The last thing he said before he shut it behind me was:

"I wouldn't go bothering Walter Hendryx about the story of Sara's. She's not a very trustworthy reporter, and Hendryx isn't as tolerant of intruders as I am."

So it was true.

I left my car where it was and crossed to a taxi stand on the opposite corner. There was a yellow cab at the stand, with a brown-faced driver reading a comic book behind the wheel. The comic book had dead women on the cover. The driver detached his hot eyes from its interior, leaned wearily over the back of the seat, and opened the door for me. "Where to?"

"A man called Walter Hendryx—know where he lives?"

"Off of Foothill Drive. I been up there before. It's a two-fifty run—outside the city limits." His New Jersey accent didn't quite go with his Sicilian features.

"Newark?"

"Trenton." He showed bad teeth in a good smile. "Want to make something out of it?"

"Nope. Let's go."

He spoke to me over his shoulder when we were out of the heavy downtown traffic. "You got your passport?"

"What kind of place are you taking me to?"

"They don't like visitors. You got to have a visa to get in, and a writ of habeas corpus to get out. The old man's scared of burglars or something."

"Why?"

"He's got about ten million reasons, the way I hear it. Ten million bucks." He smacked his lips.

"Where did he get it?"

"You tell me. I'll drop everything and take off for the same place."

"You and me both."

"I heard he's a big contractor in L.A.," the driver said. "I drove a reporter up here a couple of months ago, from one of the L.A. papers.

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He was after an interview with the old guy—about a tax case."

"A corporate tax?"

"I wouldn't know. It's way over my head, friend, all that tax business. I have enough trouble with my own forms."

"What happened to the reporter?

"I drove him right back down. The old man wouldn't see him. He likes his privacy."

"I'm beginning to get the idea."

"You a reporter, too, by any chance?"

"No."

We left the city limits. The mountains rose ahead, violet and unshadowed in the sun's lengthening rays. Foothill Drive wound through a canyon, across a high-level bridge, up the side of a hill from which the sea was visible like a low blue cloud on the horizon. We turned off the road through an open gate on which a sign was posted: *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.*

A second gate closed the road at the top of the hill. It was a double gate of wrought iron hung between a stone gatepost and a stone gatehouse. A heavy wire fence stretched out from it on both sides, following the contours of the hills as far as I could see. The Hendryx estate was about the size of a small European principality.

The driver honked his horn. A thick-waisted man in a Panama hat came out of the stone cottage. He waddled up to the cab and snapped, "Well?"

"I came to see Mr. Hendryx about a picture."

He opened the cab door and looked me over, from eyes that were heavily shuttered with old scar tissue. "You ain't the one that was here this morning."

I had my first good idea of the day. "You mean the tall fellow with the sideburns?"

"Yeah."

"I just came from him."

He rubbed his heavy chin with his knuckles, making a rasping noise. The knuckles were jammed.

"I guess it's all right," he said finally. "Give me your name and I'll phone it down to the house. You can drive down."

He opened the gate and let us through into a shallow valley. Below, in a maze of shrubbery, a long low house was flanked by tennis courts and stables. Sunk in the terraced lawn behind the house was an oval pool like a wide green eye staring at the sky. A short man in bathing trunks was sitting in a Thinker pose on the diving board at one end.

He and the pool dropped out of sight as the cab slid down the eucalyptus-lined road. It stopped under a portico at the side of the house. A uniformed maid was waiting at the door.

"This is farther than that reporter got," the driver said in an undertone. "You got connections?"

"The best people in town."

"Mr. Archer?" the maid said.

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"Mr. Hendryx is having his swim. I'll show you the way."

I told the driver to wait, and followed her through the house. I saw when I stepped outside that the man on the diving board wasn't short at all. He only seemed to be short because he was so wide. Muscle bulged out his neck, clustered on his shoulders and chest, encased his arms and legs. He looked like a graduate of Muscle Beach, a subman trying hard to be a superman.

There was another man floating in the water, the blotched brown swell of his stomach breaking the surface like the shellback of a Galapagos tortoise. Thinker stood up, accompanied by his muscles, and called to him, "Mr. Hendryx!"

The man in the water rolled over lazily and paddled to the side of the pool. Even his head was tortoiselike, seamed and bald and impervious-looking. He stood up in the waist-deep water and raised his thin brown arms. The other man bent over him. He drew him out of the water and steadied him on his feet, rubbing him with a towel.

"Thank you, Devlin."

"Yessir."

Leaning far forward with his arms dangling like a withered hairless ape, Hendryx shuffled toward me. The joints of his knees and ankles were knobbed and stiffened by what looked like arthritis. He peered up at me from his permanent crouch.

"You want to see me?" The voice that came out of his crippled body was surprisingly rich and deep. He wasn't as old as he looked. "What is it?"

"A painting was stolen last night from the San Marcos gallery—Chardin's *Apple on a Table*. I've heard that you were interested in it."

"You've been misinformed. Good afternoon." His face closed like a fist.

"You haven't heard all of it."

Disregarding me, he called to the maid who was waiting at a distance. "Show this man out."

Devlin came up beside me, strutting like a wrestler, his great curved hands conspicuous.

"The rest of it," I said, "is that Hugh Western was murdered at the same time. I think you knew him?"

"I knew him, yes. His death is unfortunate. Regrettable. But so far as I know, it has nothing to do with the Chardin and nothing to do with me. Will you go now, or do I have to have you removed?"

He raised his cold eyes to mine. I stared him down, but there wasn't much satisfaction in that.

"You take murder pretty lightly, Hendryx."

"Mr. Hendryx to you," Devlin said in my ear. "Come on now, bud. You heard what Mr. Hendryx said."

"I don't take orders from him."

"I do," he said with a lopsided grin like a heat-split in a melon. His small eyes shifted to Hendryx. "You want for me to throw him out?"

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Hendryx nodded, backing away. His eyes were heating up, as if the prospect of violence excited him. Devlin's hand took my wrist. His fingers closed around it and overlapped.

"What is this, Devlin?" I said. "I thought Hugh Western was a pal of yours."

"Sure thing."

"I'm trying to find who killed him. Aren't you interested? Or did you slap him down yourself?"

Devlin blinked stupidly, trying to hold two questions in his mind at the same time.

Hendryx said from a safe distance, "Don't talk. Just give him a going-over and toss him out."

Devlin looked at Hendryx. His grip was like a thick handcuff on my wrist. I jerked his arm up and ducked under it, breaking the hold, and chopped at his nape. The bulging back of his neck was hard as a redwood bole.

He wheeled, then reached for me again. The muscles in his arms moved like drugged serpents. He was slow. My right fist found his chin and snapped it back on his neck. He recovered, and swung at me. I stepped inside his roundhouse and hammered his ridged stomach, twice, four times. It was like knocking my fists against the side of a corrugated iron building. His great arms closed on me. I slipped down and away.

When he came after me, I shifted my attack to his head, jabbing with the left until he was off-balance on his heels. Then I pivoted and threw a long right hook which changed to an uppercut. An electric shock surged up my arm. Devlin lay down on the green tiles, chilled like a side of beef.

I looked across him at Hendryx. There was no fear in his eyes, only calculation. He backed into a canvas chair and sat down clumsily.

"You're fairly tough, it seems. Perhaps you used to be a fighter? I've owned a few fighters in my time. You might have a future at it, if you were younger."

"It's a sucker's game. So is larceny."

"Larceny-farceny," he said surprisingly. "What did you say you do?"

"I'm a private detective."

"Private, eh?" His mouth curved in a lipless tortoise grin. "You interest me, Mr. Archer. I could find a use for you—a place in my organization."

"What kind of organization?"

"I'm a builder, a mass-producer of houses. Like most successful entrepreneurs, I make enemies: cranks and bleeding hearts and psychopathic veterans who think the world owes them something. Devlin here isn't quite the man I thought he was. But you—"

"Forget it. I'm pretty choosey about the people I work for."

"An idealist, eh? A cleancut young American idealist." The smile was still on his mouth; it was

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saturnine. "Well, Mr. Idealist, you're wasting your time. I know nothing about this picture or anything connected with it. You're also wasting my time."

"It seems to be expendable. I think you're lying, incidentally."

Hendryx didn't answer me directly. He called to the maid, "Telephone the gate. Tell Shaw we're having a little trouble with a guest. Then you can come back and look after this." He jerked a thumb at muscle-boy, who was showing signs of life.

I said to the maid, "Don't bother telephoning. I'm leaving."

She shrugged and looked at Hendryx. He nodded. I followed her out.

"You didn't stay long," the cab driver said.

"No. Do you know where Admiral Turner lives?"

"Curiously enough, I do. I should charge extra for the information."

"Take me there."

He let me out in a street of big old houses set far back from the sidewalk behind sandstone walls and high eugenia hedges. I paid him off and climbed the sloping walk to the Turner house. It was a weathered frame building, gabled and turreted in the style of the nineties. A gray-haired housekeeper who had survived from the same period answered my knock.

"The Admiral's in the garden," she said. "Will you come out?"

The garden was massed with many-colored begonia, surrounded by a vine-covered wall. The Admiral, in stained and faded khakis, was chopping weeds in a flowerbed with furious concentration. When he saw me he leaned on his hoe and wiped his wet forehead with the back of his hand.

"You should come in out of the sun," the housekeeper said in a nagging way. "A man of your age —"

"Nonsense. Go away, Mrs. Harris." She went. "What can I do for you, Mr.—?"

"Archer. I guess you've heard that we found Hugh Western's body."

"Sara came home and told me half an hour ago. It's a foul thing, and completely mystifying. He was to have married—"

His voice broke off. He glanced toward the stone cottage at the rear of the garden. Alice Turner was there at an open window. She wasn't looking in our direction. She had a tiny paint brush in her hand, and she was working at an easel.

"It's not as mystifying as it was. I'm starting to put the pieces together, Admiral."

He turned back to me quickly. His eyes became hard and empty and again they reminded me of gun muzzles.

"Just who are you? What's your interest in this case?"

"I'm a friend of Hugh Western's.

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I stopped off here to see him, and found him dead. I hardly think my interest is out of place."

"No, of course not," he growled. "On the other hand, I don't believe in amateur detectives running around like chickens with their heads cut off, fouling up the authorities."

"I'm not exactly an amateur. I used to be a cop. And any fouling up there's been has been done by other people."

"Are you accusing me?"

"If the shoe fits."

He met my eyes for a time, trying to master me and the situation. But he was old and bewildered. Slowly the aggressive ego faded from his gaze. He became almost querulous.

"You'll excuse me. I don't know what it's all about. I've been rather upset by everything that's happened."

"What about your daughter?" Alice was still at the window, working at her picture and paying no attention to our voices. "Doesn't she know Hugh is dead?"

"Yes. She knows. You mustn't misunderstand what Alice is doing. There are many ways of enduring grief, and we have a custom in the Turner family of working it out of our system. Hard work is the cure for a great many evils." He changed the subject, and his tone, abruptly. "And what is your idea of what's happened?"

"It's no more than a suspicion right now. I'm not sure who stole your picture, but I think I know where it is."

"Well?"

"There's a man named Walter Hendryx who lives in the foothills outside the city. You know him?"

"Slightly."

"He probably has the Chardin. I'm morally certain he has it, as a matter of fact, though I don't know how he got it."

The Admiral tried to smile, and made a dismal failure of it. "You're not suggesting that Hendryx took it? He's not exactly mobile, you know."

"Hilary Todd is very mobile," I said. "Todd visited Hendryx this morning. I'd be willing to bet even money he had the Chardin."

"You didn't see it, however?"

"I didn't have to. I've seen Todd."

A woman's voice said from the shadow of the back porch, "The man is right, Johnston."

Sara Turner came down the path toward us, her high heels spiking the flagstones angrily.

"Hilary did it!" she cried. "He stole the picture and murdered Hugh. I saw him last night at midnight. He had red mountain clay on his clothes."

"It's strange you didn't mention it before," the Admiral said dryly.

I looked into her face. Her eyes were bloodshot, and the eyelids were swollen with weeping. Her mouth was swollen, too. When she opened it to reply, I could see that the lower lip was split.

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"I just remembered."

I wondered if the blow that split her lip had reminded her.

"And where did you see Hilary Todd last night at midnight?"

"Where?"

In the instant of silence that followed, I heard footsteps behind me. Alice had come out of her cottage. She walked like a sleepwalker dreaming a bad dream, and stopped beside her father without a word to any of us.

Sara's face had been twisting in search of an answer, and finally found it. "I met him at the Presidio. I dropped in there for a cup of coffee after the show."

"You are a liar, Sara," the Admiral said. "The Presidio closes at ten o'clock."

"It wasn't the Presidio," she said rapidly. "It was the bar across the street, the Club Fourteen. I had dinner at the Presidio, and I confused them—"

The Admiral brushed past her without waiting to hear more, and started for the house. Alice went with him. The old man walked unsteadily, leaning on her arm.

"Did you really see Hilary last night?" I asked her.

She stood there for a minute, looking at me. Her face was disorganized, raddled with passion. "Yes, I saw him. I had a date with him at ten o'clock. I waited in his flat for over two hours. He didn't show up until after midnight. I couldn't tell *him* that." She jerked one shoulder contemptuously toward the house.

"And he had red clay on his clothes?"

"Yes. It took me a while to connect it with Hugh."

"Are you going to tell the police?"

She smiled a secret and unpleasant smile. "How can I? I've got a marriage to go on with, such as it is."

"You told me."

"I like you." Without moving, she gave the impression of leaning toward me. "I'm fed up with all the little stinkers that populate this town!"

I kept it cool and clean, but very nasty. "Were you fed up with Hugh Western, Mrs. Turner?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard that he dropped you hard a couple of months ago. Somebody dropped him hard last night in his studio."

"I haven't been near his studio for weeks."

"Never did any posing for him?"

Her face seemed to grow smaller and sharper. She laid one narrow taloned hand on my arm. "Can I trust you, Mr. Archer?"

"Not if you murdered Hugh."

"I didn't—I swear I didn't! Hilary did!"

"But you were there last night."

"No."

"I think you were. There was a charcoal sketch on the easel, and you posed for it, didn't you?"

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Her nerves were badly strained, but she tried to be coquettish. "How would you know?"

"The way you carry your body. It reminds me of the picture."

"Do you approve?"

"Listen, Mrs. Turner. You don't seem to realize that that sketch is evidence, and destroying it is a crime."

"I didn't destroy it."

"Then where did you put it?"

"I haven't said I took it."

"But you did."

"Yes, I did," she admitted finally. "But it isn't evidence in this case. I posed for it six months ago, and Hugh had it in his studio. When I heard he was dead this afternoon, I went to get it, just to be sure it wouldn't turn up in the newspapers. He had it on the easel for some reason, and had ruined it with a beard. I don't know why."

"The beard would make sense if your story was changed a little. If you quarreled while Hugh was sketching you last night, and you hit him over the head with a metal fist. You might have drawn the beard yourself, to cover up."

"Don't be ridiculous. If I had anything to cover up I would have destroyed the sketch. Anyway, I can't draw."

"Hilary can."

"Go to hell," she said between her teeth. "You're just another stinker like the rest of them."

She walked emphatically to the house. I followed her into the long, dim hallway. Halfway up the stairs to the second floor she turned and flung down to me, "I hadn't destroyed it, but I'm going to now."

There was nothing I could do about that, and I started out. When I passed the door of the living-room, the Admiral called out, "Is that you, Archer? Come here a minute, eh?"

He was sitting with Alice on a semicircular leather lounge, set into a huge bay window at the front of the room. He got up and moved toward me ponderously, his head down like a charging bull's. His face was a jaundiced yellow, bloodless under the tan.

"You're entirely wrong about the Chardin," he said. "Hilary Todd had nothing to do with stealing it. In fact, it wasn't stolen. I removed it from the gallery myself."

"You denied that this morning."

"I do as I please with my own possessions. I'm accountable to no one, certainly not to you."

"Dr. Silliman might like to know," I said with irony.

"I'll tell him in my own good time."

"Will you tell him why you took it?"

"Certainly. Now, if you've made yourself sufficiently obnoxious, I'll ask you to leave my house."

"Father." Alice came up to him and placed a hand on his arm. "Mr. Archer has only been trying to help."

"And getting nowhere," I said. "I made the mistake of assuming

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that some of Hugh's friends were honest."

"That's enough!" he roared. "Get out!"

Alice caught up with me on the veranda. "Don't go away angry. Father can be terribly childish, but he means well."

"I don't get it. He lied this morning, or else he's lying now."

"He isn't lying," she said earnestly. "He was simply playing a trick on Dr. Silliman and the trustees. It's what happened to Hugh afterwards that made it seem important."

"Did you know that he took the picture himself?"

"He told me just now, before you came into the house. I made him tell you."

"You'd better let Silliman in on the joke," I said unpleasantly. "He's probably going crazy."

"He is," she said. "I saw him at the gallery this afternoon, and he was tearing his hair. Do you have your car?"

"I came up here in a taxi."

"I'll drive you down."

"Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"It's better when I'm doing something," she said.

An old black sedan was standing in the drive beside the house. We got in, and she backed it into the street, then turned downhill toward the center of town.

Watching her face I said, "Of course you realize I don't believe his story."

"Father's, you mean?" She didn't seem surprised. "I don't know what to believe, myself."

"When did he say he took the Chardin?"

"Last night. Hugh was working on the mezzanine. Father slipped away and took the picture out to the car."

"Didn't Hugh keep the door locked?"

"Apparently not. Father said not."

"But what possible reason could he have for stealing his own picture?"

"To prove a point. Father's been arguing for a long time that it would be easy to steal a picture from the gallery. He's been trying to get the board of trustees to install a burglar alarm. He's really hipped on the subject. He wouldn't lend his Chardin to the gallery until they agreed to insure it."

"For twenty-five thousand dollars," I said, half to myself. Twenty-five thousand dollars was motive enough for a man to steal his own picture. And if Hugh Western witnessed the theft, there was motive for murder. "Your father's made a pretty good story out of it. But where's the picture now?"

"He didn't tell me. It's probably hidden in the house somewhere."

"I doubt it. It's more likely somewhere in Walter Hendryx' house."

She let out a little gasp. "What makes you say that? Do you know Walter Hendryx?"

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"I've met him. Do you know him?"

"He's a horrible man," she said. "I can't imagine why you think he has it."

"It's pure hunch."

"Where would he get it? Father wouldn't dream of selling it to him."

"Hilary Todd would."

"Hilary? You think Hilary stole it?"

"I'm going to ask him. Let me off at his shop, will you? I'll see you at the gallery later."

The *Closed* sign was still hanging inside the plate glass, and the front door was locked. I went around to the back of the shop by the alley. The door under the stairs was standing partly open. I went in without knocking.

The living-room was empty. The smell of alcohol rose from the stain on the wall where Sara had smashed her glass. I crossed the passage to the door on the other side. It, too, was partly open. I pushed it wider and went in.

Hilary Todd was sprawled face down on the bed, with an open suitcase crushed under the weight of his body. The silver handle of his ice pick stood up between his shoulder blades in the center of a wet, dark stain. The silver glinted coldly in a ray of light which came through the half-closed venetian blinds.

I felt for his pulse and couldn't find it. His head was twisted sideways, and his empty dark eyes stared unblinking at the wall. A slight breeze from the open window at the foot of the bed ruffled the hair along the side of his head.

I burrowed under the heavy body and went through the pockets. In the inside breast pocket of the coat I found what I was looking for: a plain white business envelope, unsealed, containing $15,000 in large bills.

(continued on page 95)

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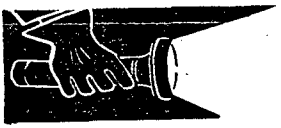

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Rereading of classics may sometimes revise retrospect. Of Harper's Dorothy L. Sayers revivals, HAVE HIS CARCASE (1932; $3.95) has its moments of Wimseyan charm and a noble puzzle-gimmick, but is crudely plotted and interminable. But MURDER MUST ADVERTISE (1933; $3.50) holds up as a lively and knowing libel on the advertising business, surprisingly undated, and admirably integrated with a novel of detection.

★ ★ ★ ★ **THE SHORT CASES OF INSPECTOR MAIGRET, *by Georges Simenon*** (Crime Club, $2.95)

As EQMM readers know, the brief exploits of the patient Parisian are often among his best. Here are 5, all from EQMM (1949-57), translated with uncommon readability by Lawrence G. Blochman and (I hope) by me.

★ ★ ★ **SHADOW OF GUILT, *by Patrick Quentin*** (Random, $2.95)

Conventional enough murder of blackmailing amorist, but a technical paragon of how to construct the suspense-detective story.

★ ★ ★ **THE SAPPHIRE CONFERENCE, *by Peter Graaf*** (Washburn, $2.95)

Disappearance of great scientist (to Russia?) furnishes meat for best book yet by constantly improving blender of American attitude (skip-tracer Joe Dust) and British matter.

★ ★ ★ **MAN RUNNING, *by Elliot West*** (Little, Brown, $3.50)

Terrors of a passport-less American in today's Europe—close to Geoffrey Household in its sense of underplayed psychological adventure.

★ ★ ★ **BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR, *edited by David C. Cooke*** (Dutton, $2.95)

Uneven but often rewarding lot. First-rate Hugh Pentecost, Edgar-winning William O'Farrell; EQMM well represented by Thomas Flanagan and especially Roy Vickers.

BAKER STREET BY-WAYS (Baker Street Irregulars, $5), by James Edward Holroyd, Chairman of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, is written with such warmth, grace and love that it should have an appeal far beyond the limited ranks of the devoutly Irregular.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**NICHOLAS DIMINNO**
TITLE:	***The Simple Solution***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	A Lieutenant of police
LOCALE:	A city in the United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*What is a detective? A legman? Yes. A doorbell ringer? Yes. But that's only a small part of it. What do the legs tell the brain? What do the doors open up to?*

THE LIEUTENANT RATHER ADMIRED him at first. He had none of the distraught air and melancholy of some men whose wives had disappeared, and it was dealing with that type that had caused the Lieutenant some of the most uncomfortable moments in his thirty years on the force. But this fellow was calm, even chatty; you'd think his wife disappeared every week.

"But you must have some idea, Mr. Blake," he said. "You knew your wife better than anyone else."

"Not so," said Blake promptly, making an effort to lift his foot that was wrapped in a heavy cast. The Lieutenant sensed that the other was thrusting the foot at him to make a point. "I knew her less well than anyone else, which is the reason I married her. To know Esther well was to avoid her."

"You mean you wished her out of the way?"

"I did," said Blake readily. "But through divorce, the usual channels, not like this. It's so bizarre. If I thought up a situation as odd as this and wrote it up, my editors would think I'd lost my grip."

"Oh, yes, you're a writer, aren't you?"

"In a small way."

The Lieutenant glanced at the row of books that stood prominently on the mantelpiece, each bearing the author's name of Benedict Blake, and murmured the usual polite, "I must read them sometime."

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"I wouldn't," put in Blake candidly. "They were written for a certain audience, Lieutenant and you are not quite what I had in mind."

The Lieutenant grunted. "Mr. Blake, I may as well be frank. I believe there's been foul play."

"You think Esther was murdered?"

"I do."

"And her body, where is it?"

The Lieutenant looked at him hard. "You have no idea?"

"Lieutenant," said Blake with the gentle accents of one addressing a backward child, "I was up in my room quite helpless with a high fever and this bad foot, as you may have noticed."

"I've noticed the way you've pushed that foot into the conversation," said the Lieutenant.

Blake smiled disarmingly. *"Touché.* Forgive me, Lieutenant. I didn't trust you to grasp the fact of my helplessness and I may have overdone it. I didn't wish you to waste your time in blind alleys, you see. But I'm impressed. I had no idea the police were so subtle. You know my definition of a detective?"

"No," said the Lieutenant. He knew the other would supply it with relish.

"A detective is a man who shot someone in the leg in a liquor store holdup. Ergo, he becomes a Sherlock Holmes."

"Very interesting," said the Lieutenant.

"A detective is a man who rings doorbells. Deduction, intuition, and all that rubbish. Do you ring doorbells, Lieutenant?" Blake's eyes mocked him.

"I ring doorbells," he said. "Now to return to the little matter of your wife."

"It *is* a little matter, Lieutenant," laughed Blake.

This was a bit thick, thought the Lieutenant. He was rapidly losing his admiration for this fellow. "I must say it's refreshing, Mr. Blake, to meet a man like you. Usually when we have to inform the bereaved that something's happened to their loved one we meet with hysteria and all sorts of unpleasantness. But you're like a breath of fresh air. Why, I might have told you your parakeet was missing."

"Ah, then I'd have worried," said Blake. "But why do you say 'bereaved'? You've no evidence that Esther is dead. My own opinion is that she received a summons of some kind, a phone call or telegram, and hurried off to meet someone. Enroute she may have been hit by a bus. Or it may have been an old flame she met and they're now sailing for Java. I'd check those possibilities, Lieutenant."

"You're very kind," said the Lieutenant. "But I've learned just enough about your wife to know that she wasn't likely to do any of those exotic things. She wasn't even likely to get hit by a bus. There is such a type, you know."

Blake sighed and moved his foot

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again. "You're quite right. Esther wasn't the type to be hit by a bus. A shame, too."

"You're a cool customer, if you'll forgive my saying so," said the Lieutenant.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, but I don't deserve it. You see I fully expect Esther to walk in that door any minute. If not today, tomorrow. She's that sort."

"And if she does?" he said sharply.

"We'll go on living together."

"Miserably?"

"Ah, you've heard? Yes, it was no secret that Esther and I were not two of history's great lovers. Esther had a sharp tongue, sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"Why'd you marry her?" asked the Lieutenant curiously, for Blake was a handsome man.

"Ten years ago her tongue wasn't quite as sharp. And she was always attractive."

"Was she wealthy?"

"Middling," said Blake. "And your next question will be, 'Did she have insurance?' A small amount. The old girl realized that she was difficult to live with at times and didn't want to place an added temptation in people's way. There'll hardly be enough to bury her."

"Bury her?" stabbed the Lieutenant quickly.

"If she's dead," added Blake. "Now if you'll forgive me, Lieutenant, I must get to work on my new book. There's a deadline on it."

The Lieutenant looked at him for a moment without speaking. He'd met some odd ones in his time but Blake was now at the top of the list.

"Your wife missing without a trace—and you must get to work on your book?"

"It's not quite as cold-blooded as it sounds, Lieutenant." Blake lit a cigarette. "For one thing, I'm sure Esther is safe. For another, I promised this manuscript to my editor months ago. If I don't send it along soon, the publication date will have to be postponed."

There was no doubt of it, thought the Lieutenant as he stood up; he much preferred people who showed some feeling, even if they yelled and screamed and made things generally uncomfortable. A man like this Blake would give anyone the creeps. His eye took in the room and the supine figure of the writer.

"You never left this room?" he said.

"Not for one minute. It would be impossible." Blake pointed to his immobilized foot. "Dr. Meadows in town will vouch for this."

"We may wish our own man to look at it," said the Lieutenant.

"By all means," said Blake. "As long as he's not clumsy. Will you move that tray over here, Lieutenant? And hand me those pencils?"

The Lieutenant complied and Blake hunched himself up on the bed and began to scribble. The Lieutenant watched him, gauging the

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degree of his helplessness, and had to admit it was unlikely he could have come down the narrow stairs and done his wife in. And if he had, how had he disposed of her body? Bodies didn't usually disappear, not completely. They were annoyingly hard to get rid of.

"You have a question, Lieutenant?" said Blake, not looking up from his writing.

"Yes. Why does a woman who has no interests outside of her home and her bridge game suddenly disappear without a trace?"

"Ah, you heard about the bridge from the good ladies at her club. I hate bridge."

"And she made you play?"

"No, but even if she had I don't think I'd have killed her for that. Now if you'll excuse me, Lieutenant, I'm involved in a key scene. The heroine realizes she's loved this fellow all along and doesn't know how to tell him. Tricky."

"I'll leave then," said the Lieutenant.

"Thank you."

"But I'll be back."

Blake smiled at him. "I was sure of it. I'm also sure that Esther will turn up one of these days. I'll drop you a card if she does."

"There'll be no need to drop us a card," said the Lientenant curtly. "We'll be in touch."

"That's a comfort. Close the door on your way out, will you?"

The Lieutenant's face was flaming as he clumped down the stairs. He felt like a schoolboy coming from an interview with the principal at which he had been made to look like a lumpish dolt. It wasn't a nice feeling, and he was sharp with his driver all the way back to the police station.

He went around to see Wentworth, who was in charge of traffic and had known him for thirty years. When he had a case he couldn't find a handle to he usually talked it over with Wentworth. Sometimes it helped, sometimes it didn't. But it did some good to get the facts off his chest.

For all he knew, this might just be a case of a woman leaving home for a few days, as Blake had said. But somehow the Lieutenant didn't believe it. If he had developed anything in all his years on the force it was a feeling about people. And his feeling told him that Esther wasn't coming back and that her husband knew why.

Wentworth listened as he told about this woman who had no earthly reason to disappear, who was apparently a difficult person to live with ("The kind who beg to be murdered," said Wentworth, to show he understood), who had no real friends, no relatives, whose every action in life pointed to a tidy, orderly existence—almost too orderly—vanishing on the afternoon of a bridge tournament at her own club. Had he explained that she was a rabid bridge player?

"No, but that makes it all the

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more suspicious," said Wentworth, who read books. "Bridge players do not vanish on the day of bridge tournaments."

"Same thought as I had," said the Lieutenant.

"Blake absolutely couldn't get out of bed?"

"Absolutely."

Wentworth thought a moment. "Did you look under the bed?"

"I looked. I felt like a fool doing it, but I looked."

Wentworth chuckled. "There are times when I think traffic is pretty simple after all. True, it's a nightmare—but it's a logical nightmare. Your game, Charlie—well, I wouldn't have it on a bet."

The Lieutenant felt glum. "So you don't have any more ideas than I do?"

"There's no chance he had an accomplice?"

"Not a chance. There's a snoopy old coot who prowls around the neighborhood and sees everything and he hasn't reported any outsiders, except for the maid who comes in for a few hours each day. And she didn't report anyone either."

"Could our hero be carrying on with the maid?"

"Not this one. She's thin as a rail and complains about her lumbago."

"Oh, one of those. And the snoopy old character? Could he have taken a fee to get rid of Edna?"

"Esther. Not likely. He's old, very old—just has strength enough to gossip and mind everybody else's business."

Wentworth was silent for what seemed a long time. The Lieutenant hoped he was thinking of a fresh angle on the case but suspected that he was wondering what was on the lunch menu or whether he had put enough motorcycle men at that tricky crossing on Route 4.

"Could it be," said Wentworth finally, "a simple case of amnesia, maybe?"

"The snoopy old character never saw her leave."

"Did he see her enter?"

"Two days ago, yes. And she couldn't have left without being seen."

"You've checked closets et cetera?"

"I've checked closets, et cetera," said the Lieutenant wearily.

"What does our boy do for a living?"

"He writes."

"Mysteries? Could be he's making a real-life test—sort of wants to see if the police can be fooled."

"If that's his idea I'll break his other leg," said the Lieutenant grimly.

"Now, now, would Sherlock Holmes do that?" chided Wentworth.

"He made some crack about Sherlocks," said the Lieutenant. "Said we got to be detectives by shooting people in holdups. That's why I'd like to nail him—at least, one of the reasons."

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"If he's guilty, you mean?"

"He's guilty," said the Lieutenant.

Wentworth gazed at him. "Can you convince me?"

The Lieutenant rose: "No, I can barely convince myself. Well, we'll just go along and see what develops."

That was a polite way of saying that it looked hopeless and that both of them knew it. Wentworth nodded sympathetically and they made a date to go bowling the following Tuesday night, In parting, Wentworth said he hoped Esther would turn up in the meantime so the Lieutenant would have no excuse when he got trounced.

The Lieutenant had an uncomfortable few days. It was not the first time a case had baffled him; in fact, he had never had a case that didn't baffle him in some way or another, except for an obvious one in which a man got drunk and went after his wife with a cleaver.

But what annoyed him about this case was the character of Benedict Blake. He'd met some lulus in his time but never one like Blake. The writer had seemed to toy with him, had seemed to be thinking circles around him, and no man, especially a policeman, likes that feeling.

He realized that he had to learn more about this Benedict Blake—to find some flaw in the man. So early Monday morning he had his surprised driver stop in front of the public library.

The Lieutenant plodded up the steps and after wandering around the confusing halls for a few minutes was directed by a man in uniform to the main reference room. He wrote out call slips and eventually was given the collected works of Benedict Blake. When he came down the steps with volumes under both arms his driver's eyes almost popped.

"What's so unusual?" he growled. "Haven't you ever seen a man with a book in his hand?"

"Yeah, Lieutenant, but . . ." The driver's voice trailed off.

But not you, he wants to say, thought the Lieutenant. "A little reading would help everybody on this force, Rooney."

"That's right, Lieutenant."

"And I don't mean just Police Procedure. I mean literature."

"That's right, Lieutenant."

"Anything that's about people can make you a better cop."

"I never thought of it that way, Lieutenant."

"You never thought, period. Now drive me back and you can curl up and go to sleep."

While Rooney said lightly that he didn't sleep, but that you could get awfully bored just sitting behind the wheel, the Lieutenant thumbed through the books. Some of the words were unfamiliar and a sentence here and there didn't make too much sense. But maybe once he got hold of the story it would all fall into place. At least, he hoped

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so. These books had to tell him something about the mind of Benedict Blake so that when he talked to him again he wouldn't feel so much like a nincompoop.

It was going to be heavy reading though. It would mess up his evenings badly. And his wife had already complained to often that he was giving too much time to his job. As she always said, when she married him she expected to lose him for sixteen hours a day, but this —this was ridiculous. It had come to be a little joke of hers.

Eight days later he flung the last of the books away from him in disgust. He had all but ruined his eyes and learned nothing but the inner yearnings of poets, actors, rich ladies, and hundreds of other people, most of whom made no sense to him at all. Nothing he'd read had helped him piece together the character of Benedict Blake. He was as far from knowing what made the man tick as when he started.

The other aspects of the investigation had also run into dead ends. The police doctor had certified that Blake was immobile with a genuinely fractured foot. Missing persons bulletins, road checks, insurance reports, doorbell ringing—all had failed to turn up a clue. This Esther person had vanished as if she'd dropped down a sixty-foot well.

He made a note to check to see if there were any wells on the Blake property, but there wasn't much hope. His men had gone over the place square inch by square inch and if there were any wells they'd been built in the last few days. *Esther, won't you please come home,* he found himself humming absently. If Wentworth could hear him he'd think he had reached his dotage.

On a slow morning a week later he drove around to the library and lugged the books back to the desk on the third floor.

"You enjoyed Benedict Blake?" asked the librarian.

"Very interesting," said the Lieutenant, who hated to hurt people's feelings.

"So many find him puzzling," said the librarian.

"I see their point," said the Lieutenant. "This all he wrote? No autobiography or anything?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Will you wait a moment?"

"I think I've read enough, thanks," he said, edging toward the door.

"It'll just take a moment," she said, already deep in the catalogue file.

Might as well, thought the Lieutenant. I'm probably the first human she's talked to today, poor thing. Libraries gave him the jitters. They were so quiet. Give him a riot anytime.

"There's nothing here," said the librarian, "but we have a Benedict Blake aficionada on the staff. I'll call her over."

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"No, no," he protested. "I really can't wait."

"It'll just take a moment." She was off down the corridor, her sensible rubber heels going slap-slap on the hard floor.

He waited, becoming more and more irritated with himself, and it seemed as if he'd waited hours in the echoing, vaulted room before he heard the slap-slap of the sensible shoes and knew that rescue was coming. The librarian had another girl with her, a small intense one with spectacles.

"You wish to know about Benedict Blake?" said the intense one. "We often discuss his work in our Wednesday Forum. Can you make it next Wednesday?"

"Wednesday's my busy day," he said. "I just wanted to know, did he write any other books or stories?"

"One other book before he found himself," said the girl. "Rather garish."

"What's that?" He bent toward her, for he was a tall man.

"Rather garish," she enunciated. "A murder mystery."

Murder? A bell went off somewhere in the Lientenant's head, but he remained calm. "Where can I get it?"

"I don't think you can," she said. "It was long, long ago. I'm sure everyone's forgotten it, even Benedict Blake."

"What's the title? Who published it?" He had his notebook out.

"The title I don't remember, but the publisher was the Cyclops Press."

"Spell that," he said and she did. "What was the book about, do you remember?"

"No," she said flatly. "There've been so many mysteries since, and I've read most of them. But if you can make it Wednesday night . . . our forum . . ."

"I'll try," he said. It paid sometimes to stand around and shoot the breeze with the unlikeliest people. He would have to impress that on the younger men in the department. Of course, this lead would probably fizzle out like the others, but there was no need to tell the younger men that.

After a session with old telephone and business directories he finally located the former president of the Cyclops Press. The man's name was Peterson and he was now located in the warehouse district near the river. He was in importing but the address told the Lieutenant that he wasn't importing anything important.

He knocked on the door and a voice said, "Walk in." He walked in.

The man who had to be Peterson sat behind a desk crammed with papers and bric-a-brac. He was in his sixties and looked tired. "Yes?" he said.

"You the publisher of Cyclops Press?"

The man looked at him quizzical-

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ly. "You're a little late. Eighteen years, to be exact."

"Out of business?"

"I'm an importer now. What can I do for you?"

The Lieutenant tried to look as unofficial as possible. "I'm a Benedict Blake fan and I understand you published his first book. Where can I get a copy?"

"The Simple Solution?"

"Is that the title?"

"That's the title, my friend." Peterson shoved some papers from his desk and leaned his elbows on it. "Can you beat it? For twenty years I don't hear a word about that book and then all of a sudden it's keeping me awake nights."

"How's that?" said the Lieutenant.

"You from television?" countered Peterson.

"What?" The Lieutenant was taken aback.

"If you're from television I told your bosses the facts. There's no change in the facts, mister. So don't waste my time."

Peterson went back to his bills of lading and the only way to bring him out of it was to flash the tin. The Lieutenant flashed it.

"Now what'd I do?" said Peterson. "I got a license . . ."

"Never mind that," said the Lieutenant. "What's all this about television?"

Peterson sighed. "I thought the Twenties were crazy but this is even worse."

"You see Benedict Blake lately?"

"No, thank goodness."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I don't want to see him."

Ah, it was good to meet a non-Benedict Blake fan. You could learn even more from them than from the other kind. The Lieutenant took a chair, noticing Peterson's sour expression as he did so. "I'll make this quick, Peterson."

"What's it all about?"

"Tell you later. Now about this television. Explain that."

Peterson swiveled back and passed a hand over his eyes. "A week ago a man calls me from the network. They've got this show. *The Gentle Art*—a murder series. Anyway, one of their staff's browsing in an old second-hand store and finds a copy of *The Simple Solution*. Probably the last one in existence."

"Where'd the others go?"

Peterson shrugged. "To wrap sandwiches, who knows? The book came out twenty years ago, and in not the very best binding. So this fellow finds it and thinks it'll make a good show for them. He calls me up to talk terms and right away I get in touch with Oscar Bentz—"

"Who's Oscar Bentz?" The Lieutenant's pencil was poised.

"That's Benedict Blake," said Peterson. "You don't think he was born Benedict Blake, do you?"

"I'm new to the literary game. So you called Blake."

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"And he chewed my head off. Got hysterical. Said he wasn't having anything of *his* on television. One minute because the book was a crude job and would ruin his reputation, the next minute because the TV guys would murder it. Like it was Shakespeare or something. I told him it meant money in the bank, money we never expected, but I just couldn't reason with him. He was like a crazy man. If I let them do it on TV he'd sue me, he'd shoot me, he'd—let me tell you, he didn't sound like any of those sophisticated characters he writes about."

The Lieutenant felt a glow. So Benedict Blake could get angry and excited just like other people. It was a comfort to know.

"Why'd he get so upset? He's such a calm fellow usually," said the Lieutenant.

Peterson fixed him with a glance. "You know him?

"I met him."

"Look, officer, what's this all about? I didn't murder anybody."

"Let's get back to what we were discussing," said the Lieutenant.

"I'd rather not," said Peterson. "It raises my blood pressure."

"Did Blake ask you to get the book back from the network?"

"How could I? They bought it in a bookstore. It was theirs."

The Lieutenant asked the name of the network and Peterson supplied it.

"*The Simple Solution,* eh? What was the simple solution?"

"Officer, this was twenty years ago. We've been through two wars since and as you can tell from just looking at this office that a lot of things have happened to me. I once had an office on Fifth—"

"It was about murder. What kind of murder?"

Peterson shook his head. "I can't remember what I had to eat for lunch, so I'm going to remember a plot from twenty years ago?"

"Didn't the network discuss it with you?"

"Just the sales price." Peterson looked around his shabby office. "My cut would have paid the rent."

The Lieutenant got up. "Have you heard any news of Blake lately? Anything at all?"

"No. I met him on the street one day and he cut me dead. Blake's ancient history to me."

The Lieutenant said, "Thanks, Mr. Peterson. By the way, what do you import?"

"Back scratchers, elephants—anything in ivory."

Not for him, thought the Lieutenant as he closed the door behind him; now if it had been a nice alligator handbag at wholesale . . .

Downstairs he nudged Rooney and they set off for the network. It was housed in one of the city's most modern buildings, a skyscraper of steel and blue glass. The Lieutenant spoke to a string of receptionists before he came to a small office door that said "Story Editor."

"Story Editor?" he said to the

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jowly youth who sat behind a desk leafing through a script. *"The Gentle Art?"*

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

"I understand you were interested in a book by Benedict Blake."

The jowly youth stared from under lidded eyes. "Well?"

"Could I see that book?"

The youth said, "I don't know how you got up here but you're going right down again." He went to a phone and was calling someone when the Lieutenant pulled out the tin. The youth blinked and suddenly looked very frightened.

"Nothing to get bothered about," soothed the Lieutenant. "Just a whim of mine to see that book."

The youth licked his lips. "We haven't got it."

"Why not?"

"It was destroyed. Since the author wouldn't give permission—"

The Lieutenant stared at him and knew beyond question the lad was lying. Some showed it in their eyes, some by a flatness in their voices. This one didn't show it in any particular way—but he was lying.

"Are you the story editor?" said the Lieutenant.

"I'm Lusk, his assistant."

"Who found the book in the first place?"

Lusk hesitated, then said, "I did."

"Who paid for the book?"

"Why, the network—"

"And who destroyed it?"

Lusk hesitated again. "I did."

"You had the authority?"

Lusk jerked his head. "Well, you just have to look around and see how cluttered this place is and the book was a mess—dog-eared and everything. No point in keeping it around."

"The way I get the picture," said the Lieutenant, leaning against a desk, "is that you bought the book with the network's money and then somebody bought the book from you. And you kept the money."

"No!" said Lusk.

"Yes," said the Lieutenant. He was on familiar ground now and the procedure came automatically. "Yes," he said grimly.

"Look, how much do you think that book cost the network?" said Lusk with a nervous laugh. "It was in a bundle that I got for a *quarter!*"

"And how much did you get for it?" stabbed the Lieutenant.

"Who said . . . ?" began Lusk.

"You know who," said the Lieutenant.

Lusk glanced at his hands, then his shoulders began to shake. "Why don't you go after the big crooks for a change?" he said in a muffled voice, and the Lieutenant realized he was crying. "So it cost the network maybe a dime and I made a profit on it. I found the book, didn't I?"

"Just tell me what happened and nobody'll know anything," said the Lieutenant. "Your network won't miss the dime. They're loaded." A

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fine philosophy for a cop—the Commissioner should hear him.

Lusk's shoulders stopped shaking and he rubbed a hand across his face. "This guy Blake called up and said he had to have the book for his personal library. Sentimental reasons. To remind him of his struggles and so on. He was going to have it leather bound."

"You realized he wanted it bad, so you quoted a nice juicy price." prodded the Lieutenant.

"Not so juicy. What's a hundred bucks to a bigshot like him?"

"He mailed you the hundred and you mailed him the book?"

"No, he sent a messenger."

The Lieutenant tensed—for the next minute or two would tell whether he had been wasting the taxpayer's money as usual. "What was the book about?"

Lusk got up and walked away. "It was kind of complicated."

"There was a murder, right?" said the Lieutenant. "Let's start with that. Who murdered who?"

Lusk was bending down to a file cabinet and the Lieutenant had a momentary twinge that he was reaching for a gun. But all he brought out was a manila envelope.

"Here's my synopsis," he said.

The Lieutenant took the sheet. "It's all here?"

"All there. You mind if I go out and grab a cup of coffee?"

"Better wait, Lusk. I might have some questions."

But he had no questions. It was all there—the husband who was looking for freedom, the wife who would never grant it, and the simple solution. In this one the husband was helpless with a sprained back. The other difference was that at the end the husband forgot one of his complex arrangements and suffered the same fate as his wife. That was the kind of ending—"the biter bit"—that happened so often in books, so seldom in life, thought the Inspector.

"Does Blake know you've got this outline?"

"No." Lusk looked away. "It wasn't for the files or anything. I just wanted it for myself. You know, it's a kind of cute idea."

"Yeah, awfully cute," said the Lieutenant. "You weren't planning on trying it yourself, were you?"

Lusk managed a grin. "Are you kidding? I'm not even married."

"Well, I'll be keeping an eye on you," said the Lieutenant flippantly. "I'll keep this—and Lusk?"

"Yes?"

"Don't contact Blake. If he's contacted I'll know it was you and you'll be in trouble."

"I won't go near a phone," said Lusk. "But what'd he do?"

"Nothing, for all I know," said the Lieutenant.

Lusk was looking at him curiously. "A police inspector, hm? Believe it or not, you're the first one I've ever met."

"From what I've heard about your show, I can believe it."

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The Lieutenant took the elevator down and drove to the station where he made his plans. His wife knew as soon as he phoned that he wouldn't be home for dinner, but she sounded upset when he said it might take all night. She said, for maybe the thousandth time, that she should never have married a policeman, and he hung up with a sad smile.

He and the three others he'd rounded up had a quick bite at a diner—because the job might drag on—then drove to Blake's house. There was only one light visible—in Blake's bedroom. They got in through the garage and set up operations in the basement.

The Lieutenant thought the noise of the drill would arouse Blake and whoever might be with him, but it was a big house and they were far away from his bedroom. So they heard not a peep out of Blake until the Lieutenant mounted the stairs two hours later and looked in.

Blake was lying in his bed, as usual, and over by the window was a nurse. Only she didn't have a uniform on. She was quite beautiful, thought the Inspector.

"Ah, you're back, Lieutenant," greeted Blake. "But at such an odd hour and without notice? Isn't that technically housebreaking?"

"I suppose it is, technically," apologized the Lieutenant. "It was too late for a warrant. I'd have had to wait until tomorrow." His eye strayed to the girl questioningly.

"My new housekeeper. There's no rule against a beautiful one, is there, Lieutenant?"

"Not at all," he agreed heartily. "They should all be as beautiful. A pity her job's of such short duration."

Blake's smile hardened. "What do you mean?"

"You said I rang doorbells, Mr. Blake, remember?" said the Lieutenant. "Well, I rang the right one today."

"If you're going to talk gibberish I suggest you wait until morning," said Blake rudely. "Helen, show him out."

The girl rose but the Lieutenant motioned her to stay where she was. "It was a simple solution, Blake. Does that ring a bell?"

"Why should it?" said Blake. "Stop playing Philo Vance. If you've something to say, say it."

The Lieutenant had to agree. The Philo Vance stuff was a strain for him. "Well then, you know what these are." He held out his hand and disclosed some mottled objects.

"I do not," said Blake irritably.

"Bridgework. I needn't tell you whose."

Blake stared, and when he spoke again his voice had changed. "I underestimated you, Lieutenant, underestimated you badly. By the way, I'm curious: how *did* you become a detective?"

"I shot a man in the leg," said the Lieutenant. "In a liquor store holdup."

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EDITORS FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ERNEST HARRISON**

TITLE: ***English Lesson***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Professor Kettner

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Meet a new kind of detective—an expert in Americana. It was an interesting little problem: how to prove a man had never visited the United States before . . .*

PROFESSOR KETTNER RAN HIS HAND through a mop of red hair. "Lieutenant Lindley? It can't be a parking ticket because I don't drive a car."

Lindley laughed politely, and sat down in front of the Professor's desk. "I've come for help, sir."

"I'm a Professor of History," replied Kettner, "at the moment endeavoring to dictate to my secretary. I can't conceive of myself helping the police solve a crime."

Lieutenant Lindley turned an appreciative glance at Miss Potts and ignored the protest. "Certainly, sir. They tell me you're an expert on—" He examined a piece of paper in his hand. "Americana?"

The Professor's auburn eyes lit up. "Only in a humble way."

Lindley leaned forward, gathering confidence. "I've brought a problem that might interest you. It's out of the usual run."

Professor Kettner turned an apologetic glance at Miss Potts who nodded encouragement. "Carry on, Professor," she murmured, "I can stay until late to finish my notes."

"Very well, Lieutenant—my secretary is happy. Proceed."

Lindley closed his right eye and rubbed a knuckle nervously across the lid. "I don't want to waste time, so you'll have to take a good deal on trust. We've got a man on our hands, and we want to know if he's ever been in the United States before."

"But surely that must be a simple investigative matter."

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"It's really an alibi. This man, Cyril Muffett, is suspected by Scotland Yard of lifting the Clarence Street diamonds—nearly a million dollar haul. They arrested him, but he claims he was here in Carter City for three weeks before the crime, and flew back to England the day after the robbery was discovered. The alibi stood up so well that Scotland Yard broke a rule or two and had Muffett sent here to be checked. No loophole that we can find."

"How does he substantiate his claim?"

"He says he stayed the three weeks with a Mr. and Mrs. Greer. They're old-fashioned storybook Yankees just turned fifty, who live on Grant Street. Ideal for an alibi—they'd satisfy a jury every inch of the way. He also mentions a clerk at the drug store where he used to phone his girl friend up at Olympia Falls every morning."

"Why from the drug store?"

"He says he didn't want his friends to overhear his mushy talk. And the girl friend backs him up."

"Sounds as if Scotland Yard may have arrested the wrong man."

The Lieutenant transferred a knuckle to his left eyelid. "Not quite. The alibi's phoney, we're sure of that—but it's going to be impossible to prove it the way things are going. Our guess is the theft was planned long in advance, and some accomplice—good at acting and impersonating—set up the alibi for him. Maybe the witnesses were all bribed, maybe just sucked in. But I can tell you we'll have to break the alibi pretty soon or we'll never do it."

"Passport, visa?"

"All in order—but you'd expect that if somebody set the stage for Muffett."

"Quite so." The Professor raised himself on his long spindly legs and looked directly at Lindley. "Quite so. I'm still at a loss, however, to understand how I can assist you."

"I told you the case wasn't run-of-the-mill. According to the English police, Muffett is a Londoner—Bow Bells and all the trimmings—although without an accent. They say their evidence shows he's never been in the United States until he was just brought here—in fact, they're positive he's never been out of England."

"Difficult to be positive. How can they be sure?"

"It's not too difficult these days, Professor. Scotland Yard's usually more cautious than careless you know."

"So you thought I might improvise a trap for him?"

"That's it. If you could, say, ask him some question which anyone who had visited the United States would be *bound* to know, but an Englishman would *not* know—sort of prove he couldn't *possibly* have been here as he claims . . ."

"Have you tried yourselves?"

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"Yes, sir." Lindley's voice carried an overtone of apology.

"Questions about dollars and cents, supermarkets, small quarts, and the use of idiom and vernacular?"

"Yes, sir—that sort of thing exactly."

"Useless, I'm afraid. He'd be ready for most of it, and three weeks' stay isn't long enough to guarantee he'd know much about our way of life or about the American language. We'll have to find something which an Englishman could not possibly overlook even in a couple of days' visit."

"We thought that your being an expert on Americana . . ."

The Professor walked over to the window where the yellow sun set his red hair glistening. Miss Potts sighed and watched him tensely.

The Professor stood in thought. Suddenly he banged his fist on the window ledge. "It's a chance, Lieutenant. It might fail but—" His voice became nervous with excitement. "I know the very person who might help us." He swung round, and shouted across the room. "Miss Potts, get me Phalanx 3-5941. Yes, I think I can find *two* men to help us. Then we can be doubly sure."

Lindley rose from his chair. "Thank you, sir. Might I ask who the two men are who are going to help us?"

"I don't know yet, Lieutenant."

"You don't know?"

"Not yet—but I will soon."

"Well, Mr.—er—Muffett." Professor Kettner addressed a confident little man in a striped blue suit. "I gather you claim to have been in the United States recently for a period of three weeks. It is my purpose to test if this is true."

The answering smile was condescending. "This is very foolish. There are several people who can prove I was here."

"Good. Then, if you are innocent, you will not object to answering two simple questions and asking a third."

"No—why should I? Only I don't claim to be perfect, you know."

"That is understood. What I propose to do is this. First, I will ask you a question, which you will answer. Second, you will telephone a friend of mine and ask him a question, which he will answer. Third, you will telephone another friend of mine, who will ask you a final question. Notice the second call—you are to *ask* the question, not answer it."

For the first time the little man showed uneasiness. Professor Kettner glanced at Lindley and Detective-Inspector Donaldson of Scotland Yard. He drew a slip of paper from his pocket and glanced at it carefully. "My first question is this: where would you most like to spend Easter?"

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The answer came quickly. "Brighton."

The Professor made no comment but, taking up the telephone, pushed it across the table toward the little man. "Now, Mr. Muffett. You will telephone a friend of mine and ask him the question written on this slip of paper. We will listen to your conversation on the extension phone."

The Professor walked across to where the two detectives sat alongside a receiver. "Go ahead, Mr. Muffett. My friend's number is Olympia 4-8132—the same exchange as your girl friend's."

Cyril Muffett shrugged impatiently, then dialed. A brisk voice answered. "Operator."

"Hello, operator. I am dialing Olympia 4-8132. Will you get me the number please?"

After a moment a rough voice answered. "Hello?"

The little man looked down at the slip of paper. "This is Mr. Cyril Muffett speaking. I have a question to ask you. It is: Do you approve of Lord Altrincham?"

"No," came back the rough voice. "I prefer Liz." The receiver clicked at the other end, and the little man laid down his own in its cradle. "Now, Professor, I hope this silly charade will end soon."

The Professor sighed, seeming disappointed. "Our last question. Please telephone Sidcup 5-9412 and answer."

This time the call went straight through. "Hello," said Muffett. "I believe you have a question to ask me?"

"Yes," came an obviously foreign voice. "It is difficult for me, but I try always. Do you need a passport to enter Canada?"

"I don't know—I've never been to Canada. But I believe you can travel there without one."

As he put down the receiver for the last time, the little man raised his head and smiled with cockney confidence at the Professor.

"That's that! Any serious mistake, Professor?"

The Professor of History and expert in Americana turned to the detectives. "You arrested the right man, gentlemen. Mr. Muffett has never been to the United States before. His alibi is demonstrably false."

The little man sat unmoved. "Bluff. Suppose I *did* make a slip. I said at the beginning—"

The Professor cut him off with a wave of the hand. "True. Only there's one mistake you couldn't possibly have made if you'd been here in Carter City for a few weeks and telephoned from the drug store every day. Your mind was so set on the questions that you didn't look at the telephone in front of you."

"I don't understand," interrupted Lindley. "That's just an ordinary telephone, Professor."

"Of course it is. Only it's just a bit different from an English one."

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"It's exactly the same—" began Cyril Muffett, and stopped dead as a chuckle broke out from Inspector Donaldson.

"No, Muffett," continued the Professor. "They appear to be the same, but there's one big difference. Look at the dial of our American phone. There are ten holes for your finger, and they contain every letter of the alphabet except Q and Z, together with every numeral from one to nought. An English dial is *almost* the same—except that the letter O is also missing. When you dial an exchange in England with a letter O, you use the numeral nought. That is exactly what you did, Muffett. You instinctively dialed Olympia the English way, and got the operator. Nobody who had telephoned in the United States every day for three weeks could possibly make such an error."

The little man shrugged again, and his eyes closed. "So. I just didn't know, mate—that's all. Just a bit of cockney ignorance, Professor."

The Professor smiled. "Even though you telephoned your girl friend on that same exchange every day? Nonsense! Nevertheless, I set a second trap for you—just to make doubly sure. I gave you the number Sidcup 5-9412 to dial. In the United States we always dial the first *two* letters of the exchange—in London you dial the first *three* letters. There is, in fact, no Sidcup exchange in Carter City, but you would not know that. Following your English telephoning habits, you dialed S-I-D and then 5-9412. The last number, being over the normal seven turns, did not register of course. What you actually got was Phalanx 3-5941. If you look at the dial, you will see that is so. This morning, I hadn't the faintest idea whose number that was. But before we left the University I spoke with the owner—a new Hungarian American—who agreed to help us. As indeed the other gentleman who answered the second question. Well, Mr. Muffett, do I make a good spider?"

The effect on the little man was startling. As though stung, he jumped from his seat and moved rapidly toward the door. As he did so, the Professor flung himself around the knees. The two fell heavily and within seconds the little man was handcuffed.

The Professor rose and brushed the dust from his knees. "That, Lieutenant Lindley, was a football tackle in the English style. I learned it while studying at Oxford. Good day, gentlemen."

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MURDER IS A PUBLIC MATTER

by ROSS MACDONALD

(continued from page 74)

I was standing over the bed with the money in my hand when I heard someone in the hallway. A moment later Mary appeared at the door.

"I saw you come in," she said. "I thought—" Then she saw the body.

"Someone killed Hilary," I said quietly.

"Killed Hilary?" She looked at the body on the bed and then at me. I realized that I was holding the money in plain view.

"What are you doing with that?"

I folded the bills and tucked them into my inside pocket. "I'm going to try an experiment. Be a good girl and call the police for me."

"Where did you get that money?"

"From someone it didn't belong to. Don't tell the sheriff about it. Just say that I'll be back in half an hour."

"They'll want to know where you went."

"And if you don't know, you won't be able to tell them. Now do as I say."

She looked into my face, wondering if she could trust me. Her voice was uncertain. "If you're sure you're doing the right thing."

"Nobody ever is."

I went out to my car and drove to Foothill Drive. The sun had dipped low over the sea, and the air was turning colder. By the time I reached the iron gates that cut off Walter Hendryx from ordinary mortals, the valley beyond them was in shadow.

The burly man came out of the gatehouse as if I had pressed a button. He recognized me, then pushed his face up to the window of the car. "Beat it, chum. I got orders to keep you away from here."

I restrained an impulse to push the face away, and tried diplomacy. "I came here to do your boss a favor."

"That's not the way he feels. Now blow."

"Look here." I brought the wad of bills out of my pocket, and passed them back and forth under his nose. "There's big money involved."

His eyes followed the moving bills as if they were hypnotized. "I don't take bribes," he said in a hoarse and passionate whisper.

"I'm not offering you one. But you should phone down to Hendryx, before you do anything rash, and tell him there's money in it."

"Money for him?" There was a wistful note in his voice. "How much?"

"Fifteen thousand, tell him."

"Some bonus." He whistled. "What kind of a house is he building for you, bud, that you should

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give him an extra fifteen grand?"

I didn't answer. His question gave me too much to think about. He went back into the gatehouse.

Two minutes later he came out and opened the gates. "Mr. Hendryx'll see you. But don't try any funny stuff or you won't come out on your own power."

The same maid was waiting at the door. She took me into a big rectangular room with French windows on one side, opening on the terrace. The rest of the walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling—the kind of books that are bought by the set and never read. In front of the fireplace, at the far end, Hendryx was sitting half submerged in an overstuffed armchair, with a blanket over his knees.

He looked up when I entered the room. The firelight danced on his scalp and lit his face with an angry glow. "What's this? Come here and sit down."

The maid left silently. I walked the length of the room and sat down in an armchair facing him. "I always bring bad news, Mr. Hendryx. Murder and such things. This time it's Hilary Todd."

The turtle-face didn't change, but his head made a movement of withdrawal into the shawl collar of his robe. "I'm exceedingly sorry to hear it. But my gatekeeper mentioned a matter of money. That interests me more."

"Good." I produced the bills and spread them fanwise on my knee. "Do you recognize these?"

"Should I?"

"For a man who's interested in money, you're acting very coy."

"I'm interested in its source."

"I had an idea that *you* were the source of this particular money. I have some other ideas. For instance, that Hilary Todd stole the Chardin and sold it to you. One thing I have no idea about is why you would buy a stolen picture and pay for it in cash."

His false teeth glistened coldly in the firelight. Like the man at the gate, he kept his eyes on the money. "The picture wasn't stolen. I bought it legally from its rightful owner."

"I might believe you if you hadn't denied any knowledge of it this afternoon. I think you knew it was stolen."

His voice took on a cutting edge. "It was not." He slipped his blue-veined hand inside his robe and brought out a folded sheet of paper, which he handed me.

It was a bill of sale for the picture, informal but legal, written in longhand on the stationery of the San Marcos Beach Club, signed by Admiral Johnston Turner, and dated that day.

"Now may I ask you where you got hold of that money?"

"I'll be frank with you, Mr. Hendryx. I took it from the body of Hilary Todd, when he had no further use for it."

"That's a criminal act, I believe."

My brain was racing, trying to

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organize a mass of contradictory facts. "I have a notion that you're not going to talk to anyone about it."

He shrugged. "You seem to be full of notions."

"I have another. Whether or not you're grateful to me for bringing you this money, I think you should be."

"Have you any reason for saying that?" He had shifted his eyes from the money on my knee to my face.

"You're in the building business, Mr. Hendryx?"

"Yes." His voice was flat.

"I don't know exactly how you got this money. My guess is that you gouged it out of home buyers, by demanding a cash bonus in addition to the appraised value of the houses you've been selling to veterans."

"That's a pretty comprehensive piece of guesswork, isn't it?"

"I don't expect you to admit it. On the other hand, you probably wouldn't want this money traced to you. The fact that you haven't banked it is an indication of that. That's why Todd could count on you to keep this picture deal quiet. And that's why you should be grateful to me."

The turtle-eyes stared into mine, and admitted nothing. "If I *were* grateful, what form do you suggest my gratitude should take?"

"I want the picture. I've sort of set my heart on it."

"Keep the money instead."

"This money is no good to me. Dirty money never is."

He threw the blanket off and levered himself out of the chair. "You're somewhat more honest than I'd supposed. You're offering, then, to buy the picture back from me with that money?"

"Exactly."

"And if I don't agree?"

"The money goes to the Intelligence Unit of the Internal Revenue Bureau."

There was silence for a while, broken by the fire hissing and sputtering in an irritable undertone.

"Very well," he said at length. "Give me the money."

"Give me the picture."

He waded across the heavy rug, moving his feet a few inches at a time, and pressed a corner of one of the bookcases. It swung open like a door. Behind it was the face of a large wall safe. I waited uncomfortably while he twirled the double dials.

A minute later he shuffled back to me with the picture in his hands. The boy in the blue waistcoat was there in the frame, still watching the apple, which looked good enough to eat after more than two hundred years.

Hendryx's withered face had settled into a kind of malevolent resignation. "You realize that this is no better than blackmail."

"On the contrary, I'm saving you from the consequences of your own poor judgment. You shouldn't do

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business with thieves and murderers."

"You still insist the picture was stolen?"

"I think it was. You probably know it was. Will you answer one question?"

"Perhaps."

"When Hilary Todd approached you about buying this picture, did he claim to represent Admiral Turner?"

"Of course. You have the bill of sale in your hand. It's signed by the Admiral."

"I see that, but I don't know his signature."

"I do. Now, if you have no further questions, may I have my money?"

"Just one more: who killed Hugh Western?"

"I don't know," he said heavily.

He held out his brown hand with the palm upward. I gave him the sheaf of bills.

"And the bill of sale, if you please."

"It wasn't part of the bargain."

"It has to be."

"I suppose you're right." I handed it to him.

"Please don't come back a third time," he said as he rang for the maid. "I find your visits tiring and annoying."

"I won't come back," I said. I didn't need to.

In the early evening traffic lull I made good time back to the center of town. I drove automatically, thinking of other things: the dead man on the mountain, the other dead man in the bedroom, the twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of canvas and pigment on the seat beside me. Hendryx had answered one question, but he had raised ten more. The questions and the facts that failed to answer them swarmed in my head like bees.

I parked in the alley beside the art gallery and got out of the car with the Chardin under my arm. There was talk and laughter and the tiny din of cutlery in the restaurant patio beyond the hedge. On the other side of the alley a light was shining behind the barred window of Silliman's office. I reached up between the bars and tapped on the window. I couldn't see beyond the closed venetian blinds.

Someone opened the casement. It was Alice, her blonde head aureoled against the light. "Who is it?" she said in a frightened whisper.

"Archer." I had a sudden, rather theatrical impulse. I held up the Chardin and passed it to her edgewise between the bars. She took it from my hands and let out a little yelp of surprise.

"It was where I thought it would be," I said.

Silliman appeared at her shoulder, squeaking, "What is it? What is it?"

My brain was doing a double take on the action I'd just performed. *I had returned the Chardin to the*

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gallery without using the door! It could have been stolen the same way, by Hilary Todd or anyone else who had access to the building. No human being could pass through the bars—but a picture could!

Silliman's head came out the window like a gray mop being shaken. "Where on earth did you find it?"

I had no story ready, so I said nothing.

A gentle hand touched my arm and stayed, like a bird alighting. It was Mary.

"I've been watching for you," she said. "The sheriff's in Hilary's shop, and he's raving mad. He said he's going to put you in jail, as a material witness."

"You didn't tell him about the money?" I said in an undertone.

"No. Did you really get the picture?"

"Come inside and see."

As we turned the corner of the building, a car left the curb in front of it, and started up the street with a roar. It was Admiral Turner's black sedan.

"It looks like Alice driving," Mary said.

"She's gone to tell her father, probably."

I made a sudden decision, and headed back to my car.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to see the Admiral's reaction to the news."

She followed me to the car. "Take me."

"You'd better stay here. There's no telling what might happen."

I tried to shut the door, but she held on to it. "You're always running off and leaving me to make your explanations."

"All right, get in. I don't have time to argue."

I drove straight up the alley and across the parking lot to Rubio Street. There was a uniformed policeman standing at the back door of Hilary's shop, but he didn't try to stop us.

"What did the police have to say about Hilary?" I asked her.

"Not much. The ice pick had been wiped clean of fingerprints, and they had no idea who did it."

I went through a yellow light and left a chorus of indignant honkings at the intersection behind me.

"You said you didn't know what would happen when you got there. Do you think the Admiral—?" She left the sentence unfinished.

"I don't know. I have a feeling we soon will, though."

Finally I asked, "Is this the street?"

"Yes."

My tires shrieked on the corner, and again in front of the house. She was out of the car before I was.

"Stay back," I told her. "This may be dangerous."

She let me go up the walk ahead of her. The black sedan was in the drive with the headlights burning and the left front door hanging open. The front door of the house

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was closed but there was a light behind it. I went in without knocking.

Sara came out of the living-room. All day her face had been going to pieces, and now it was old and slack and ugly. Her bright hair was ragged at the edges, and her voice was ragged. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I want to see the Admiral. Where is he?"

"How should I know? I can't keep track of any of my men." She took a step toward me, staggered, and almost fell.

Mary took hold of her and eased her into a chair. Her head leaned limply against the wall, and her mouth hung open. The lipstick on her mouth was like a rim of cracked dry blood.

"They must be here."

The single shot that we heard then was an exclamation point at the end of my sentence. It came from somewhere back of the house, muffled by walls and distance.

I went through and into the garden. There were lights in the gardener's cottage, and a man's shadow moved across the window. I ran up the path to the cottage's open door, and froze there.

Admiral Turner was facing me with a gun in his hand. It was a heavy-caliber automatic, the kind the Navy issued. From its round, questioning mouth a whisp of blue smoke trailed. Alice lay face down on the carpeted floor between us.

I looked into the mouth of the gun, then into Turner's granite face. "You killed her."

But Alice was the one who answered. "Go away," she said. The words came out in a rush of sobbing that racked her prostrate body.

"This is a private matter, Archer." The gun stirred slightly in the Admiral's hand. I could feel its pressure across the width of the room. "Do as she says."

"I heard a shot. Murder is a public matter."

"There has been no murder, as you can see."

"You don't remember well."

"I have nothing to do with that," he said. "I was cleaning my gun, and forgot that it was loaded."

"So Alice lay down and cried? You'll have to do better than that, Admiral."

"Her nerves are shaken. But I assure you that mine are not." He took three slow steps toward me, and paused by the girl on the floor. The gun was very steady in his hand. "Now go, or I'll have to use this."

The pressure of the gun was increasing. I put my hands on the door frame and held myself still. "You seem to be sure it's loaded now," I said.

Between my words I heard the faint, harsh whispering of shifting gravel on the garden path behind me. I spoke up loudly, to drown out the sound.

"Admiral, you say that you had

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nothing to do with the murder. Then why did Todd come to the beach club this morning? Why did you change your story about the Chardin?"

He looked down at his daughter as if she could answer the questions. She made no sound, but her shoulders were shaking with internal sobbing.

As I watched the two of them, father and daughter, the pattern of the day finally came into focus. As its center was the muzzle of the Admiral's gun, the round blue mouth of death.

I said, very carefully, to gain time, "I can guess what Todd said to you this morning. Do you want me to dub in the dialogue?"

He glanced up sharply, and the gun glanced up. There were no more sounds in the garden. If Mary was as quick as I thought, she'd be at the telephone.

"He told you he'd stolen your picture and had a buyer for it. But Hendryx was cautious. Todd needed proof that he had a right to sell it. You gave him the proof. And when Todd completed the transaction, you let him keep the money."

"Nonsense! Bloody nonsense." But he was a poor actor, and a worse liar.

"I've seen the bill of sale, Admiral. The only question left is why you gave it to Todd."

His lips moved as if he was going to speak. No words came out.

"And I'll answer that one, too. Todd knew who killed Hugh Western. So did you. You had to keep him quiet, even if it meant conniving at the theft of your own picture."

"I connived at nothing." His voice was losing its strength, but his gun was as potent as ever.

"Alice did," I said. "She helped Todd steal it this morning. She passed it out the window to him when Silliman and I were on the mezzanine. Which is one of the things he told you at the beach club, isn't it?"

"Todd has been feeding you lies. Unless you give me your word that you won't repeat those lies, not to anyone, I'm going to have to shoot you."

His hand contracted, squeezing off the automatic's safety. The tiny noise it made seemed very significant in the silence. It echoed from the walls.

"Todd will soon be feeding worms," I said. "He's dead, Admiral."

"Dead?" His voice had sunk to an old man's quaver, rustling in his throat.

"Stabbed with an ice pick in his apartment."

"When?"

"This afternoon. Do you still see any point in trying to shoot me?"

"You're lying, Archer."

"No. There's been a second murder—Todd's."

He looked down at the girl at his feet. His eyes were bewildered.

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There was danger in his pain and confusion. I was the source of his pain, and he might strike out blindly at me. I watched the gun in his hand, waiting for a chance to move in on it. My arms were rigid, braced against the door frame.

Mary Western ducked under my left arm and stepped into the room in front of me. She had no weapon, except her courage.

"He's telling the truth," she said. "Hilary Todd was stabbed to death today."

"Put down the gun," I said. "There's nothing left to save. You thought you were protecting an unfortunate girl. She's turned out to be a double murderess.

He was watching the girl on the floor. "If this is true, Allie, I wash my hands of you."

No sound came from her. Her face was hidden by her yellow sheaf of hair. The old man groaned. The gun sagged in his hand. I moved, pushing Mary to one side, and snatched it away from him. He didn't resist, but my forehead was suddenly streaming with sweat.

"You were probably next on her list," I said.

"No."

The muffled word came from his daughter. She began to get up, rising laboriously from her hands and knees like a hurt fighter. She flung her hair back. Her face had hardly changed. It was as lovely as ever, on the surface, but empty of meaning—like a doll's plastic face.

"I was next on my list," she said dully. "I tried to shoot myself when I realized you knew about me. Father stopped me."

"I didn't know about you until now."

"You did. You must have. When you were talking to father in the garden, you meant me to hear it all —everything you said about Hilary."

"Did I?"

The Admiral said with a kind of awe, "You killed him, Allie. Why did you want his blood on your hands? Why?" His own hand paused in mid-air. He looked at her as if he had fathered a strange and evil thing.

She bowed her head in silence. I answered for her. "She'd stolen the Chardin for Todd and met his conditions. But then she saw that he couldn't get away, or if he did he'd be brought back, and questioned. She couldn't be sure he'd keep quiet about Hugh. This afternoon she made sure. The second murder always comes easier."

"No!" She shook her blonde head violently. "I didn't murder Hugh. I hit him with something, but I didn't intend to kill him. He struck me first—he *struck* me, and then I hit him back."

"With a deadly weapon, a metal fist. You hit at him twice with it. The second blow didn't miss."

"But I didn't *mean* to kill him. Hilary knew I didn't mean to kill him."

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"How would he know? Was he there?"

"He was downstairs in his flat. When he heard Hugh fall, he came up. Hugh was still alive. He died in Hilary's car, when we were starting for the hospital. Hilary said he'd help me cover up. He took that horrible fist and threw it into the sea.

"I hardly knew what I was doing by that time. Hilary did it all. He put the body in Hugh's car and drove it up the mountain. I followed in his car and brought him back. On the way back he told me why he was helping me. He needed money. He knew we had no money, but he had a chance to sell the Chardin. I took it for him this morning. *I had to!* Everything I did, I did because I had to."

She looked from me to her father. He averted his face from her.

"You didn't have to smash Hugh's skull," I said. "Why did you do that?"

Her doll's eyes rolled in her head, then came back to me, glinting with a cold and deathly coquetry. "If I tell you, will you do one thing for me? One favor? Give me father's gun for just a second?"

"And let you kill us all?"

"Only myself," she said. "Just leave one shell in it."

"Don't give it to her," the Admiral said. "She's done enough to disgrace us."

"I have no intention of giving it to her. And I don't have to be told why she killed Hugh. While she was waiting in his studio last night, she found a sketch of his. It was an old sketch, but she didn't know that. She'd never seen it before, for obvious reasons."

"What kind of sketch?"

"A portrait of a nude woman. She tacked it up on the easel and decorated it with a beard. When Hugh came home he saw what she'd done. He didn't like to have his pictures spoiled, and he probably slapped her face."

"He hit me with his fist," Alice said. "I killed him in self-defense."

"That may be the way you've rationalized it. Actually, you killed him out of jealousy."

She laughed. It was a cruel sound, like vital tissue being ruptured. "Jealousy of *her?*"

"The same jealousy that made you ruin the sketch."

Her eyes widened, but they were blind, looking into herself. "Jealousy? I don't know. I felt so lonely, so all alone in the world. I had nobody to love me—not since my mother died."

"It isn't true, Alice. You had me." The Admiral's tentative hand came out and paused again in the air, as though there was an invisible wall between them.

"I never had you. I hardly saw you. Then Sara took you. I had no one—no one until Hugh. I thought at last that I had someone to love me, someone I could count on—"

Her voice broke off. The Admi-

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ral looked everywhere but at his daughter. The room was like a cubicle in hell where lost souls suffered under the silent treatment. The silence was finally broken by the sound of a distant siren. It rose and expanded until its lamentation filled the night.

Alice was crying, with her face uncovered. Mary Western came forward and put her arm around her. "Don't cry." Her voice was warm. Her face had a grave beauty.

"You hate me, too."

"No. I'm sorry for you, Alice. Sorrier than I am for Hugh."

The Admiral touched my arm. "Who was the woman in the sketch?" he said in a trembling voice.

I looked into his tired old face and decided that he had suffered enough.

"I don't know," I said.

But I could see the knowledge in his eyes.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **STEPHEN BARR**

TITLE: ***The Unique Guinea***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Herewith an old and classic situation—but there is nothing wrong (quite the contrary!) with the old and classic when an author comes up with a new wrinkle . . .*

"NEVER HEARD OF IT," FINLAY said, with the air of dispelling a rumor. "It's not in any catalogue that I've ever seen." He glanced sideways at the heavy gold coin that lay on the dining table and took a sip of the '88 port. "And there's no mention of the incident in history books—I'm sure of that."

"Bonnie Prince Charlie," their host, Alistair de Mar, said, "didn't have enough money to go through with it. He planned to flood England with spurious currency, which would have embarrassed the Walpole administration. That was in 1745, before he landed in Scotland, and a French engraver made the dies. The guineas were to be struck in base metal—probably pinchbeck—but this single one was made of gold, and the Young Pretender kept it as a memento. The dies were destroyed and the plan was never disclosed—I fancy he didn't relish being known as a coiner. It's been in my family since the Eighteenth Century."

Alistair de Mar picked it up and handed it to Wilson, who looked at it closely.

"It's unique," de Mar went on. "Sir John Dyer offered me ten thousand pounds for it, but I said I've got ten thousand pounds, and nobody else has one of these."

Wilson said, "But—" and then put the coin on the table, shaking his head.

His neighbor, Colonel Wragg, picked it up. "Not much good at this sort of thing," he said. "My specialty's oriental money. Looks like George II, though." He frowned.

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"There are too many laurel leaves in the chaplet," said Alistair de Mar. "And the date is off-center. As a matter of fact, to my eye the portrait looks more Bourbon than Hanoverian—show it to Sutro and see what he thinks."

Sutro was a sculptor. He nodded his head over the coin. "Yes," he said. "Looks like Rigaud's Louis XIV. It has a nice balance though." He stood it on its edge.

The only one of the six men who had not spoken was Powys, a professor of ethnology at Cambridge. He smiled self-deprecatingly, then said in a thin voice, "European royalty have a tendency to resemble one another—they have always intermarried. How did this happen to come into the possession of your family, de Mar?"

Alistair de Mar looked smug. "An ancestress of mine was living in France at the time . . ." He left the implication floating in the air. "She was a Lovat. She was very gay—and very naughty. They say the Prince cooled off when she took up with a young scapegrace from the Virginia colony—he was named Pennyfeather, believe it or not. We have a chalk drawing of her by Greuze—very pretty. Well," he stood up, "shall we go to the library?"

The others stood up too, and de Mar looked along the table. "By the way, who has the guinea?"

There was a silence. Everyone gazed at the table, then at each other.

"Probably under a coffee cup," Powys said, looking under a coffee cup.

"Let's see now," Colonel Wragg said. "I handed it to you, Sutro, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I put it down—over there, I think."

Dessert plates and silverware were moved aside, and Wilson pushed his chair back and began looking under the table. "Maybe it fell on the floor," he said.

The search went on for some time, but without success. Finally they stood looking at one another in a decidedly uncomfortable silence. That is, five of them stood: Wilson was still on his hands and knees. "It's *got* to be here," he was heard to say.

"Why?"

"Because it's not on the table." Finally he, too, got up and dusted off his trousers.

There was another silence, even more uncomfortable this time.

"I think," Finlay said authoritatively, "that we owe it to ourselves, as well as to our host, to . . . to turn out our pockets."

"Oh, no," de Mar started to say, but the Colonel cleared his throat.

"I agree," he said. "Absolutely!" He began to empty his pockets onto the table—cigar case and billfold, both of which he opened, loose change, a penknife, and various other things. They all watched him except Alistair de Mar, who looked utterly embarrassed.

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Then the others followed suit—all but Wilson. He made a half-hearted gesture toward his pocket, then stopped. His face was red.

"Well?" Finlay spoke sharply.

Wilson shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "I can explain later, but—"

"But what, sir?" Colonel Wragg asked.

"But right now I . . . well, I can't. I think we ought to go on searching. It's absurd to be so melodramatic when we haven't really made a thorough search." Wilson spoke positively, but he sounded rather on the defensive.

"And just what," Colonel Wragg said, "would you consider a thorough search? I have had considerable experience tracking in an immense jungle, so I think I am competent to look for something in a small room!" Finlay backed him up with an emphatic nod of agreement.

Wilson glanced around at the hostile faces—except their host who avoided his eye—and set his jaw. "I am quite sure you would not miss a broken twig, Colonel," he said. "But the circumstances here are different."

"They most certainly are!"

"For one thing," Wilson continued evenly, "a mere turning out of the pockets is not the same thing as being searched."

"Have you the effrontery to suggest—" Colonel Wragg began.

"But don't you see," Wilson broke in, "that the very offer to turn out your pockets implies admission of the possibility?"

"In my case, sir, it implies, and demonstrates, that I have not got the guinea!"

"In that case let's look for it in the room again."

"The room," Finlay said, "has been searched. You, Mr. Wilson, have not—and since it was you who suggested that we go on searching, why . . ." He glanced at Colonel Wragg, who nodded.

"No, really, you chaps," de Mar said. "It's bound to turn up." But he didn't sound convinced.

"The point, of course," Powys said daintily, "is why Mr. Wilson refuses to turn out his pockets, and at the same time urges us on to turning out the room. I must confess an inability to guess the reason for the latter in the light of the former." He raised his eyebrows and blinked.

"I . . ." Wilson breathed deeply. "I cannot explain it to you. I can only swear that I didn't take it. I can only entreat you to help me go on searching. I would have been willing to take your word—I beg you to take mine!" He looked around and this time caught the eye of de Mar. There was speculation in his host's face.

After all, Wilson had come to him with a letter of introduction from an old friend in America, and they had hit it off. But what did anyone in the room really know of him?

"It is perfectly obvious that you

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either have the coin," said Finlay, "or you have not. If you have not, it is equally obvious that you can have no conceivable reason for concealment. I insist that you do as the rest of us—turn out your pockets!"

"You mean that it is inconceivable to *you*," Wilson said, and looked at de Mar again. "I appeal to you to give me one more chance to search—for us all to search—this room".

"Or perhaps," Colonel Wragg said, "a chance to pretend to find it?"

Wilson stiffened.

"Gentlemen, *please!*" de Mar said.

"You may watch me," Wilson said. "In fact, I shall be willing to do no more than organize the search. I suggest that the room be squared off and searched in sequence."

Sutro, the sculptor, brightened. "Good idea," he said. "Got a piece of chalk, Alistair?"

"I think we can draw imaginary lines," de Mar said.

Wilson stood aside, perhaps a little ostentatiously, and the others began to relax from their tension. Colonel Wragg shrugged and with a great show of conceding a doubtful point said, "Very well."

"Wait," Wilson said suddenly. "You were sitting there, Sutro, weren't you?"

They all looked at him, and the sculptor nodded.

"And it's just come to me that you stood the guinea on its edge," Wilson went on. "So isn't it possible that it rolled? I mean, when de Mar stood up, we all looked away from it."

No one answered him, and he pointed to a crack where the drop-leaf table had not been quite pushed together.

Finlay frowned; he did not see the crack. "We've looked on the floor," he said. "You looked there yourself."

"Look up at the underside of the table," Wilson said.

Sutro dropped to his knees and disappeared from view. "Well, I'm damned!" he said. "Here it is!" He reappeared, triumphantly holding the guinea. "It must have fallen through and got stuck!"

He put the gold coin on the table and the others gathered around. Then they all turned to Wilson. Their faces displayed various mixtures of surprise, perplexity, and even a little shame.

"My dear sir," Colonel Wragg said finally, "would you mind telling us *why* you refused to . . ."

"To show you what I had in my pocket?" Wilson said. "I would have done so earlier, but I didn't want to spoil de Mar's story—and then suddenly it was too late." He came forward and held out his closed hand. "You see," he said, "Tom Pennyfeather was *my* ancestor, and Henrietta Lovat gave him this . . ."

He opened his hand. Lying in it was another golden guinea, in every respect identical with the first one.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ALEX GABY**

TITLE: ***D.A.'s Dream Case***

TYPE: Courtroom Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Donald Lindley

LOCALE: Portervale, New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Was any man ever more guilty of murder? It was an airtight case. Motive: the whole town knew it. Opportunity: found over the body one minute after the shot. Means: his own gun—and still smoking in his hand!*

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING THAT NO one really gets away with murder—not really; and of course there is no degree to murder—a little goes a long, long way.

And old Frank Ruppert didn't get away with murder, no matter what you might have heard in Portervale. I can tell you now he did not—but, to begin, as the other saying goes, at the beginning . . .

Portervale, in hilly upstate New York, is just big enough to have two detectives full-time. I am one, John Becker is the other. This was my Sunday on; John was fishing.

We are not big enough, on the other hand, to have a full-time mayor, or a full-time medical examiner, or an airport—a nice little city that did things its own way, but on the whole got things done one way or another. A nice little place, although we have our own little nest of gamblers—every town has them, even a town as pretty as Portervale on a Sunday in June.

Sundays are quiet in Portervale, and this was no exception. An hour or so before St. Anthony's had sounded its bells for the noon Mass, I was sitting with my feet up on the desk and looking out the window across the Courthouse square; and I was thinking it would take at least a murder to make something out of a Sunday in June in Portervale. Of course

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that's exactly what happened, and John Becker was fishing.

I actually jumped when the phone rang—that's how quiet it had been. It was the mayor and he was shouting, his voice pitched high; I thought maybe he was having a stroke, being sixty and too fat.

"Hold on, Mort," I said. I told you we had no full-time mayor, and Mort Harkness owned a supermarket on Arbor Street. "What's up, where are you, and I can't make out a thing you're saying."

I heard him breathe hard a few times, then calm down a little. "Get right on down to Frank Ruppert's place. It's terrible! Frank's just killed a man. It's terrible, I tell you. He's just *sitting* there!"

It was my turn to breathe hard. After all, the worst I ever had on record in my three years on the force was an assault with intent to kill, and that turned out to be strictly a family affair over a will. And now Frank Ruppert, old *Frank Ruppert*—

"Don't touch a thing," I ordered. "Stay put! I'll be right down. What was it? A knife, a gun—?"

"A gun! He's just sitting there, holding it! I tell you, it was still *smoking!*"

Not Frank Ruppert. A cold hand was playing around with my insides, but I called old Doc Steiner's house, and was told he was at the hospital on a case. This had been a cold spring, and there were lots of cases in the hospital—respiratory things, keeping our part-time medical officer running day and night. I called the hospital and left a message for him.

Then I called Floyd Mellis, our part-time county district attorney, and he was at home. Mrs. Mellis said he'd be at Frank Ruppert's as soon as he changed his clothes.

On the way down I collared Patrolman Elkland in the day room and we found a ready squad car in the car pool behind the Courthouse. "Not Frank Ruppert. Not Frank *Ruppert!*" he muttered "Who'd he kill?"

"How the hell should I know?" I snapped, with the cold hand in my insides getting colder. Then we parked the car in front of Frank Ruppert's house, that old mansion next to St. Anthony's. There was a crowd of people in front of the house, their faces scrubbed, their best clothes on. Of course, it was the congregation from the noon Mass. I told them to go home unless they had some pertinent information, but no one moved.

Elkland and I walked into the huge front room of the old place and there was a sight to see. There was the mayor, and Father Burke, and about twelve other leading citizens, all standing around as if they were paying a social call on the old gentleman; but their faces were either very pale or very red, depending on the state of their veins and their living habits, and they

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were looking everywhere except at Frank Ruppert or the thing on the floor.

Frank himself was dressed as if he were in court in his heyday as a lawyer. He had on a dark suit and a wide silk tie, and his boots were polished. His mane of white hair was carefully brushed, and he sat almost lost in one of his tall, beautiful old carved-wood and leather chairs. In his right hand, pointing to the floor, he was holding a .38 revolver, of ancient vintage, but a good-looking piece. There was still the smell of burned gunpowder, just a touch of it.

On the floor—and there was no blood—was Al Warren, his face calm, his thick crew-cut in good shape, his college-boy expression still intact—everything fine except there was a little blue hole in the center of his forehead and he was staring up at the ceiling as if wondering how the little hole got there.

It was obvious to me how it got there, and even why. The motive was perhaps a year old. Al had plenty of money, gambling and worse kinds of money, and he was spending a lot of it on Frank Ruppert's orphaned granddaughter—Julie, nineteen and very lovely, and very spoiled. There was also his snappy convertible and his twenty-seven foot cruiser on Lake Alice, and everybody in town knew that the next thing afte rthe convertible and the cruiser would be for Juloe to come down from Syracuse University some week end and be entertained by our town's bigshot gambler in his place on Ander's Hill. There had been quite a few Julies up there, and they didn't stay in Portervale long after that. We all saw it happening, and no one could stop it—not me, and especially not the old man who had spoiled her silly with his love because she was an orphan, and because, under the spoiling, she was—well, Julie, fine and wonderful and much too lonely since the accident.

"How are you, Donald?" Frank Ruppert said to me. He called me that whenever he saw me around the Courthouse. He liked to visit the courtrooms where he had spent so much of his life before retiring a few years ago. Everybody else called me Don.

"I'm fine, sir," I blurted out. "Ah—what's the story here?"

The old man smiled. "They'll tell you, my boy." He turned to Mayor Harkness. "Will you fill Donald in on what happened?"

Mort goggled at the body and seemed to be fighting for air. "Well—I—*damn*—"

Everybody looked quickly at Father Burke, also an old man with a wonderful head of white hair. He cleared his throat several times, and when he spoke he spoke clearly and quietly.

"We had just ended the Mass, and I divested myself and went out. Mort—the mayor, I mean—and the

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others were still out front and I stopped to talk with them a little. Such a fine day! And then there was this terrible report coming from Frank's—Mr. Ruppert's home. I had never heard a gunshot before, but there was no mistaking it, God save us!"

He closed his eyes and crossed himself. The mayor and the others also crossed themselves and looked down at the body.

"We came right over," Father Burke continued, very solemn now. "Everything was as you see it. Except, ah, Mr. Ruppert was standing—there by the chair next to the—the body. He sat down after we came in. He—was holding the gun."

"It was still *smoking,*" Mort yelled, and we all jumped.

"What time was that?" I asked, looking at Father Burke.

"I ended with the Mass at twelve forty-five. It could not have been more than five minutes later."

There was a chorus of agreement.

"It was about ten minutes to one, Donald," Frank Ruppert said, and we all turned to gape at him. Why should *he* have said that?

We watched him gently put the gun down on the floor as though he had become tired of holding it, and he was still smiling. A career cop, I thought—here I am a career cop and I let a murderer hold on to his gun until he gets tired of holding it! And there sat a murderer, a murderer caught red-handed—and the finest man I had ever known. There he sat, with a gun, with a motive, almost with witnesses—and I loved him, and wished to heaven it had been John Becker's Sunday and I had gone fishing.

"Donald," he said to me, smoothing the creases of his trousers with his small, delicate hands. "Will you please notify Julie at school? She may not want to come home, perhaps. But—well, her examinations are over, and she may want to come home."

The people in the room began to fidget and I could hear them murmur about Julie.

"Anyone in the room besides Mr. Ruppert when you came in?" I asked Mort. He shook his head. I went to the back of the house and out the back door, and there was the deep, green yard, the old white fence, and the road. Sam Collins, veterinarian to the gentry's poodles and Persians, was leaning against the fence.

"How long you been here, Sam?" I asked.

"Came out when I heard the shot," he said, nodding toward the big house, his eyes wide. "Hear there's been a killing in there—that right?"

"Did you see *anyone* leave the house?"

"Nope. Would have seen that. Nobody."

So that was that. I nodded to

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Sam and of course I went through every room in the house, including the one with the cabinet full of old guns that had been in the Ruppert family for generations—the cabinet with an empty hook and the faint outline in the soft, dark wood of the ancient .38 revolver. I had been in this house a couple of dozen times, all told, when I was a boy, and went to birthday parties for Louise, seven years older than Julie, before the auto accident which killed Louise and her parents, and left only Julie and the old man; but this time it was like seeing it for the first time, with each room an enemy because there wasn't someone hiding in it to lift the lid off the old man.

When I got back to the front room Doc Steiner was leaning over the body, touching it here and there with his old, crippled hands; and Floyd Mellis was there too, rocking on his little feet, bald as a light bulb, and staring at Frank Ruppert.

The only happy man in the room was Floyd Mellis. He hated Frank Ruppert as only a perpetual second-runner can hate. In everything he had run second to Frank—all his life. And now he had Frank Ruppert in a box. He had him in a case he could not lose, a case to end his career on. He was due to retire in November, and it was like a golden sunset for him—Frank Ruppert in a box.

Floyd turned to me, his little eyes bright, and sick with gloating. "Aren't you going to take him in?"

I took him in, parading him before the whole town in the squad car to do it.

Frank Ruppert was arraigned the next morning before Magistrate Max Briskin, and he didn't look at all like a man who'd spent the first night in his life in jail. His hair was neat, he'd even found time to shave, and he nodded pleasantly to Max when Max, his big Adam's apple jumping, charged him with murder in the first degree on Floyd Mellis's hastily typed-up charge sheet, and then remanded him to the Grand Jury. No bail, of course—Floyd saw to that, in person and with relish.

Julie came in to see me that afternoon, and I was surprised. I had not been friendly on the phone, and Syracuse is ninety miles from Portervale. Her eyes were swollen with crying, but she was still lovely, and I could see that the unspoiling had begun.

"Donald," she said, coming close to me, her eyes now the way they'd been a long time ago, "you've known grandfather all your life. How could he *do* such a thing? How *could* he?" And she began to sob, her dark hair coming loose along the back of her head and making her look even younger than her nineteen years.

I thought of Frank Ruppert in his cell and still I couldn't hate her, although at this minute I tried.

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"You know *exactly* why it happened, Julie!" I snapped at her.

She bit her lip and stared at me. "But we only had *fun,* Al Warren and I. I—we—I never *loved* him. I know it may have seemed that way, but— Why, he never *touched* me, Donald!"

"A bullet doesn't touch you until it hits!" I yelled, and now, instead of hating her, I watched her dark eyes flutter as if I'd hit her with my fist.

She put her hand on my arm, and it was all I could do to keep my arms from her, and to tell her it was all right, even with Frank Ruppert in a box because of her.

I watched her go, the unspoiling almost complete, and knew, no matter what, I didn't want her to leave Portervale—she had got hold of me, somehow, even when she was a skinny little kid watching us play games at her older sister's birthday parties in the big, old house only three blocks from the orphanage, where I lived then.

Well, the box began closing in on Frank Ruppert—all four sides, the lid, and the floor. We took him to Lordston, where the Grand Jury sat, and they had him indicted within an hour, and then he was formally arraigned back in Portervale with County Court Justice Francis L. Huber on the bench. Old Huber looked at old Frank with tears in his eyes, and again the only happy, sick-happy, man there was Floyd Mellis.

And suddenly it hit me very hard that this was a matter of old men—an old man retired, an old man about to retire, and an old judge past retirement age who refused to retire; and one of the old men hated another old man with a hate that made me crawl inside.

Old Floyd burned up the calendar in his hurry for the trial—the trial he couldn't lose, the trial that would finally bring him complete and utter victory over the man who had outshone him in a town where every living soul knew that Floyd had been outshone for fifty years.

Old, sick Floyd tore around his office like a madman, whipping up the case he couldn't lose. A first-year law student could have handled it better, and more thoroughly, but everybody knew it was an open-and-shut case, and needed no great preparation—a box for Frank Ruppert, no matter how hastily Floyd Mellis threw it together.

You might find this hard to believe, but only a few people came out the morning the trial opened. There were the usual Courthouse faces, but the main stream of people in Portervale stayed away. The man the town respected and loved above all other men in the town was being nailed down, and they didn't want to see it. And there was no contest, no hope. I had a warm glow in my heart for these people of Portervale as I sat in the

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back of the nearly empty courtroom and watched Floyd tear into the jurors.

Floyd rejected nearly forty jurors before he finally got his panel, and you know what he got. He got a panel that would have sent a man to the chair for smoking.

Frank Ruppert's lawyer was Stanley Sebring, Jr., three years out of Cornell Law School with a shingle two years old. Up until now he had handled nothing bigger than a sidewalk injury case, and had lost that. He was scared stiff, but I knew why the old gentleman had hired him—there was no real chance to defend, and Stanly needed the experience. That was the way the old man was.

Well, Floyd started to pound home the nails, and a child could have done what he was doing, it was that simple.

His witnesses—even Floyd Mellis had to be satisfied with such witnesses. Only the mayor, a leading clergyman, the richest banker, several councilmen—the cream of the people who had attended the noon Mass that day in St. Anthony's. And each one told his story quietly, with dignity and pain, knowing that each one told enough to do away with the old man. Not one of them could look at Frank while they were on the stand pinpointing the time of the shot, testifying under oath that it was only a minute later when they saw Frank Ruppert standing over the body, the gun in his hand still smoking.

Then came a ballistics report on the gun Frank Ruppert had been holding in his hand—that only one shell had been fired, that the gun was registered in Frank Ruppert's name, and was, in fact, part of the famous collection of Ruppert firearms, a collection started by his great grandfather, who darned near founded the town (this last bit is mine, not Floyd's).

It was a dreary debacle. Once or twice Stanley started to come alive and act as if he wanted to cross-examine, but each time Frank gently pulled on his arm, and Stanley dropped back in his chair. There was no cross-examination; there was no trial. Floyd Mellis had his day in court against Frank Ruppert after fifty years, and he made the most of it. He put every one of Frank's friends—the witnesses—on the stand, making Frank's own friends nail Frank in the box. And then it was my turn, and I was sworn in.

Floyd beamed at me, his eyes glittering and sick. "You are Donald Alfred Lindley, you are a detective on the police force in Portervale, New York, and were such on June fifth, last?"

"Yes."

"You were on duty that day, a Sunday?"

"Yes. John Becker was fishing."

He waited for the tittering to stop. "Good. We have had our lit-

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tle merriment. Very good. Tell us, please, what events took place on that day."

"Mayor Harkness called me on the telephone telling me that a man had been killed in Mr. Ruppert's home—"

"Murdered in Mr. Ruppert's home. Isn't that what he said?"

"He said killed, I believe. I took Patrolman Elkland with me and we went to the scene."

"And what time was that? What time, *exactly?*"

I understood now that Floyd knew how I felt about Frank Ruppert, and I, too, was going to help put the old man away. Otherwise there was no need for my testimony. I wanted to hit the sick old man. "I arrived at about ten minutes after one," I said.

"Then the shooting occurred a few minutes before one o'clock, is that not so?"

"Yes." I looked away from his eyes quickly and for the first time noticed that Julie had come into court and was sitting, pale as a piece of marble, in the rear of the room.

"May I observe," Floyd was saying, "that for an officer of the law your attitude and manner on this stand leave something to be desired. Aren't you interested in bringing a murderer to justice?"

I nodded, then hung my head.

"Now then—" Floyd planted himself in front of me and began to rock on his tiny feet, his hands in his belt. "In the performance of your duty at that time did you find anyone else in the house other than the witnesses and the accused?"

"I did not find anyone."

"Did you try to determine if anyone had left the house at the time of the shooting?"

"I asked Mr. Collins, the vet, behind the Ruppert house. He said he would have seen anyone leave."

"And he did not?"

"He said he did not," I muttered.

"Did you believe him?"

"I had no reason not to believe him."

"Speak up, please."

I repeated my statement, yelling it this time.

"No need to shout," he grinned. Suddenly he stopped teetering and bent down to stare at me. "There is just one point missing, however. As a detective, you should know what that is. Well—?"

I didn't get his idea immediately. He leaned closer, and I could see the little red veins in his eyes. "The motive," he said. "All detectives look for a motive. Is that not so?"

I froze. There was a murmur in the court and I saw Julie's hands come down from her face and then saw Frank Ruppert's face go white as he sat up very straight in his chair, his hand gripping young Stanley's arm.

Floyd turned and looked directly at Frank, and as long as I live I never want to see a look like that

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in a man's eyes again. It's a wonder Floyd didn't choke on his own sick triumph right then and there.

"Will there be an objection from the accused or his *eminent* attorney if I merely stipulate for the record that there was good and ample motive?" he asked, slowly and deliberately, swinging his head from Frank Ruppert to Julie, and everybody in the room swinging their heads right along with him.

Frank gripped Stanley's arm again, and Stanley got to his feet. "No objection," he croaked.

Floyd came back to me, his face red with excitement. "Would you say, Detective Lindley, that in your own knowledge there was ever a more premeditated case of murder? A murder at ten minutes before one o'clock on June fifth, last —a murder that was one minute from being witnessed by a whole congregation of our *most* eminent citizens? Would you not say without fear of any possible error or contradiction that Frank Ruppert, at ten minutes before one o'clock on June fifth, did shoot and kill Albert F. Warren—*exactly* as we have charged and for which he was indicted? Would you not say that, Detective Lindley?"

Judge Huber leaned over his bench toward me. "You don't have to answer that question." Then he peered at Floyd. "Please confine yourself to facts and not opinions, prosecutor, and also please remember you will have an opportunity to address the jury in due course. Have you any other questions to put to this witness?"

Floyd turned his back on me. "I'm through with him," he said curtly, then called for Doc Steiner. But the old doctor was still chin-deep in respiratory things at the hospital. Since it was almost noon, Judge Huber called a recess. I went to my office, drank a lot of cold water from the cooler, smoked ten cigarettes, barked at John Becker when he asked me if I wanted a sandwich, kicked the leg of the table four times, and wanted to cry—me, a career cop with a B.A., and sometimes considered a tough cookie.

Court reconvened when Doc Steiner was available, and now Julie was sitting up front, leaning over the rail toward her grandfather, practically touching heads, and the old gentleman was patting her shoulder. I looked at him from the back of the room and could not see a murderer; but of course he was, and by the end of this afternoon he would probably be a convicted murderer.

I don't know who's older, Floyd Mellis or Doc Steiner, but there were two mighty old men looking at each other, with Doc on the stand and Floyd again with his hands in his belt teetering in front of the witness chair. But then Doc stopped looking at Floyd and began looking at Frank Ruppert, and slowly nodded his head; and

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when I turned to look at Frank, he was also nodding. These two men have a secret, I thought, and I wondered about that.

"And now, Doctor," Floyd began, wanting the doctor to put one more nail into Frank, his oldest friend, "at eighteen minutes after one o'clock on June fifth, last, you entered the Ruppert residence and found the victim on the floor. There was a bullet hole in his forehead and he was dead?"

"Course he was dead!" Doc's voice crackled. "Any *fool* could see he was dead." And suddenly Doc turned and looked hard at Frank Ruppert again, nodded the same as before, and snapped his head back to Floyd. "Hell, man, didn't you *read* my report? All in there, everything. But you were in such an all-fired hurry to get Frank fried you didn't bother with little things like incidental medical reports. Man, are you a *fool*—always was!"

And then for the third time Doc looked at Frank Ruppert. "You and I know what kind of a fool this man is, eh, Frank?" he said loudly. "We always knew, didn't we?"

"Please confine your remarks to the prosecutor's questions," Judge Huber warned Doc, and then instructed Floyd Mellis to continue.

"You examined the body and found him dead," Floyd snapped at Doc. "And that was less than a half hour after the shot had been fired. That's all, Doctor."

Judge Huber looked at Stanley, expecting him to keep his seat as he had done with all the other witnesses; but this time Stanley got slowly to his feet, reading from a piece of paper I saw Frank Ruppert pass over to him, and as Stanley read the paper he became very excited.

"I wish to cross-examine," Stanley shouted, and then looked around the room, sheepishly. He walked over to Doc Steiner on the witness stand. Floyd gave him a contemptuous stare and sat down at his own table, snickering.

As he talked, Stanley forgot his nervousness. "Doctor, in your years of experience in these—uh—matters, have you found that you can set the time of death exactly?"

It became very quiet in the room, and although it had been quiet before, now it was *quiet.*

Doc Steiner let out a deep sigh, nodded, and began to grin. He put his old, crippled fingertips together and for the rest of the time he was on the stand he never took his eyes off Floyd Mellis. "Well," he said, slowly, carefully, "in the practice of medical autopsy it has been established that the time of death can be placed—ah—within an hour's period, a little more or less—that is to say, in cases where death has occurred within a matter of hours, or even a day or two."

Stanley glanced at Frank Ruppert's paper in his hand. "Doctor," he said, his voice growing a little

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loud again, "in your autopsy did you examine the contents of the stomach?"

"Yep." Doc Steiner kept staring at Floyd Mellis, his grin a little wider, and now Floyd was sitting straight up in his chair, beginning to understand that something was happening—something he hadn't expected.

"Doctor, as a result of this examination, how long was the—uh—deceased dead when you arrived at Mr. Ruppert's home."

"At least two hours, maybe more. I'd say two and one-half hours. All in my report, down at the bottom of it—if *anybody* cared to read that far, if anybody wasn't in such a damn hurry to *convict* somebody!" Doc Steiner was just about sneering at Floyd now, and Floyd was on his feet, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"Then, Doctor," Stanley went on. "The defendant could not possibly have committed the crime with which he has been *specifically* charged—that at ten minutes to one on that day he shot and killed Albert Warren. Is that not right?"

"Right!" Doc Steiner snapped.

Floyd was roaring. "The indictment didn't say *that*—it did not say *exactly*—" and there was a little froth forming around his mouth.

Judge Huber banged his gavel. "Order there, prosecutor—we will conduct this trial in a proper manner!" The judge looked at him with contempt. I remembered exactly what Floyd Mellis had said in his indictment—his open-and-shut case, his box for Frank Ruppert: it was "at or about ten minutes to one"—and even "about' does not mean two and one-half hours; and every witness from the mayor down, Floyd's perfect witnesses, had pinpointed the time for Floyd—ten minutes to one—ten minutes to one—

And now the room was beginning to fill up, the townspeople coming in from the Courthouse park, and even from across the street—the people who didn't want to see Frank Ruppert put into a box, the people who now wanted to see a miracle.

Really it was no miracle at all. I saw it as neatly as if the old gentleman had written it out for me. The miracle, if there was one, was in Frank's knowledge—he knew all about Floyd Mellis, how he would prepare his case; and he *knew* old Doc Steiner; and he *knew* how it was with old men, bitter old men; and he *knew* his town, and he *knew* his people. That was the miracle of it—Frank's knowledge of how everything would be.

A new, young, assured attorney, Stanley Sebring, Jr. was now addressing the judge.

"Your Honor," he said, "we submit that testimony by the district attorney's own witnesses has completely obviated the case for the prosecution against the defendant. The defendant could not possibly

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have committed the crime with which he is charged—specifically, that he shot and killed a man at or about one o'clock in the afternoon, on June fifth, last. At the time named in the charge and in the indictment, the victim had already been dead for two and one-half hours, as competent authority has testified, and therefore the defendant is obviously, patently, and in fact not guilty of the crime as charged.

"Therefore, your Honor, I move that the defendant be released from custody and this trial be declared void, and that it be placed in the record of this proceeding that the defendant may never again be brought to trial for the murder of one Albert F. Warren under the statute of double jeopardy, and, your Honor—"

I would like you to understand that I don't pardon murder, even justifiable murder, if there is such a thing, and if there is such a thing, this was it. No, I don't pardon murder—any murder.

Therefore it was several days before I found it possible to go to Frank Ruppert's place. Julie let me in and I kissed her. Like that. She's only eight years younger than I am and after she graduates from Syracuse it won't make so much difference; eight years, not like when we were kids.

I found the old gentleman in the huge front room sitting in that same chair, lost in it. "How are you, Donald?" he asked, and I took a good look at him. Well, you don't get away with murder—that is true, as I said at the beginning. He looked bad.

"I'm fine, sir," I said, and began poking around, feeling his eyes on me.

"You'll find it buried in the ashes in the fireplace," he murmured. "Where I put it."

I went behind him to the fireplace, reached deep into the ashes, and pulled out the silencer. Then I began squinting at the woodwork, up at the ceiling—for the bullet hole.

"Don't bother, Donald," he said. "I shot it up the fireplace."

"Care to get it off your chest, Mr. Ruppert?" I asked. "It's safe enough—now."

He looked hard at me, then put his hands on his temples, digging his slim fingers into them, as though his head hurt him a great deal. "Yes," he said. "Yes—"

He closed his eyes and talked slowly. I could hear Julie walking around upstairs. "He called me the day before. He said Julie was coming home, and for ten thousand dollars he would leave her alone—told me what he'd do if I didn't give it to him. Told me exactly what he would do—"

His white face was pinched. "I asked him what guarantee there was that he would leave her alone. He laughed—laughed and said I

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would just have to trust him . . . There was no other way, no other way. I had to kill him the way you have to kill a beast attacking a child . . . I told him to come here the next morning—and I was ready for him. I killed him with the silencer, refilled the empty chamber of the gun, and then, when the Mass ended, when my friends, my good friends, were leaving the church, I fired another shot up the fireplace—with the silencer off, of course—and waited . . ."

"Weren't you taking an awful chance on Floyd Mellis?" I asked. "You knew Doc Steiner would give the time of death in his report."

He just smiled at me.

I got up to go, and he looked at me suddenly, his face like the ashes in the fireplace. "Knowing Floyd Mellis, there really wasn't much of a chance," he said, almost in a whisper. "But if I were wrong—that would have been fine, too. You kill a beast that attacks a child, you know—you have to . . ."

He leaned back in the chair, and it was clear that the beast had killed his killer too. The old man was wounded deep, very deep, and he would not survive the wound.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GERALD KERSH**

TITLE: ***Open Verdict***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: The narrator

LOCALE: London

TIME: More than 30 years ago

COMMENTS: *The murder on Spindleberry Road was an impossible crime behind a locked door in a sealed house—so the coroner naturally declared an Open Verdict . . .*

CERTAIN OTHERS I KNOW, IN MY position, sir, have had "severe nervous breakdowns"—gone out of their minds—took to parading the streets with banners, and whatnot, shouting *Unfair!* Well, thank God, I was always steady-minded. I could always see the other side of things. So, although I was unjustly dismissed from the Force, I could still keep my balance. I could see the reason for the injustice behind my dismissal, and could get around to blaming myself for not keeping my silly mouth shut.

Actually, you know, I wasn't really sacked. I was told that if I wanted to keep what there was of my pension, I had better resign on grounds of ill health. So I did, and serves me right. I should never have made my statement without, first, having my evidence corroborated. However, no bitterness. Justifiable or unjustifiable, bitterness leads to prejudice which, carried far enough, is the same thing as madness . . . I started life in the Army, d'you see, where you learn to digest a bit of injustice here and there; because, if you do not, it gets you down and you go doolally.

Many is the good man I've known who has ruined himself by expecting too much justice. Now, I ask you, what sane man in this world really expects to get what he properly deserves?

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If I had been thirty years wiser thirty years ago, I might have been retired, now, on an Inspector's pension. Only, in the matter of an open verdict, I didn't have the sense to say nothing. I was young and foolish, d'you see, and, therefore, overeager. There was a girl I was very keen on, and I was anxious to better myself—she was used to something a cut above what I could offer her. D'you see?

I was supposed to be an intelligent officer, as far as that goes in the Police Force. But that isn't quite good enough. In those days, all the so-called intelligence in the world wouldn't get a policeman very far—seniority aside—unless he had a kind of spectacular way of showing it.

I'm not embittered, mind you. Nothing against the Force. Only I ought to have known when to stop talking . . .

At first, like everybody else, I thought nothing of it. The Police were called in after the doctor, merely as a matter of routine, d'you see. I was on a beat, then, in Hammersmith. Towards about eight o'clock one Sunday morning, neighbors on either side of a little house on Spindleberry Road were disturbed by the hysterical crying of a child at No. 9.

At first there was some talk of the N.S.P.C.C., but there was no question of that, because the people at No. 9 were simply a little orphan girl, aged eight, and her aunt, Miss Pantile, who thought the world of her niece and, far from ill-treating the child had a tendency to spoil her; because the little girl whose name was Titania, was delicate, having had rheumatic fever.

As is not uncommon, the houses in Spindleberry Road are numbered odd coming up, and even going down. The neighbors in question, therefore, were Nos. 7 and 11. Spindleberry Road, like so many of them put up around Brook Green before the turn of the century, is simply a parallel of brick barracks, sort of sectionalized and numbered. Under each number, a porch. In front of each porch, iron railings and an iron gate. At the back of each and every house, a bit of garden. I mention this, d'you see, because these houses, from a policeman's point of view, present only an elementary problem: they are accessible from front or back only.

Beg pardon—I've never quite lost the habit of making everything I say a kind of Report.

. . . Well, hearing child crying, neighbors knock at door. No answer. No. 7 shouts through letter box: "Open the door and let us in, Titania!" Child keeps on crying. Various neighbors try windows, but every window is locked from the inside. At last, No. 11, a retired captain of the Mercantile Marine, in the presence of witnesses, bursts in the back door. Meanwhile, one of the lady neighbors has come to get

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a policeman, and has found me at the corner of Rowan Road. I appear on the scene.

Not to bother you, sir, with the formalities; being within my rights, as I see them in this case, I go in, having whistled for another policeman who happens to be my sergeant. The house is in no way disturbed, but all the time, upstairs, this child is screaming as if she is being murdered, over and over again: "Auntie Lily's dead! Auntie Lily's dead!"

The bedroom is locked on the inside. Sergeant and I force the lock, and there comes out at us a terrified little golden-headed girl, frightened out of her wits. The woman from No. 11 soothes her as best she can, but the sergeant and I concentrate our attention upon Miss Lily Pantile, who is lying on a bed with her eyes and mouth wide open, stone-dead.

The local doctor was called, of course, and he said that, as far as he could tell, this poor old maiden lady had died of something like a cerebral hemorrhage at about three o'clock in the morning. On a superficial examination, this was as far as he cared to commit himself. He suggested that this was a matter for the coroner.

And that, as far as everybody was concerned, was that, d'you see? Only it was not. At the inquest it appeared that poor Miss Pantile had met her death through a most unusual injury. A gold-eyed crewel needle had been driven through her skull, and into her brain, about three inches above the left ear!

Now here, if you like, was a mystery with a capital M.

Miss Pantile lived alone with her eight-year-old niece. She had enough money of her own to support them both, but sometimes made a little extra by crewelwork—you know, embroidering with silks on a canvas background. She was especially good at creweling roses for cushion covers. The needle she favored—she had packets and packets of them—was the Cumberland Crewel Gold Eye, one of which had found its way, nobody knew how, through her skull and into her brain. But how could it possibly have found its way there?—that was the question.

There was no lack of conjecture, you may be sure. Doctors cited dozens of instances of women—tailoresses and dressmakers, particularly—who had suddenly fallen dead through having needles embedded in various vital organs. Involuntary muscular contractions, it was demonstrated, could easily send an accidentally stuck-in needle, or portion of a needle, working its way between the muscles for extraordinary distances, until it reached, for example, the heart . . .

The coroner was inclined to accept this as a solution, and declare a verdict of Death by Misadventure. Only the doctor wouldn't have that. Such cases, he said, had come to his

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attention, especially in the East End of London; and in every case the needle extracted had been in a certain way corroded, or calcified, as the case might be. In the case of Miss Lily Pantile, the crewel needle—upon the evidence of a noted pathologist—had been driven into the skull *from the outside,* with superhuman force. Part of the gold eye of the needle had been found protruding from the deceased's scalp . . . What did the coroner make of that?—the doctor asked.

The coroner was not anxious to make anything of it.

In the opinion of the doctor, could an able-bodied man have driven a needle through a human skull with his fingers?

Definitely, no.

Might this needle, then, have been driven into Miss Pantile's skull with some instrument, such as a hammer?

Possibly; but only by someone of "preternatural skill" in the use of fine steel instruments of exceptional delicacy . . .

The doctor reminded the coroner that even experienced needlewomen frequently broke far heavier needles than this gold-headed crewel needle, working with cloth of close texture. The human skull, the doctor said—calling the coroner, with his forensic experience, to witness—was a most remarkably difficult thing to penetrate, even with a specially designed instrument like a trephine.

The coroner said that one had, however, to admit the *possibility* of a crewel needle being driven through a middle-aged woman's skull with a hammer, in the hands of a highly skilled man.

. . . So it went on, d'you see. The doctor lost his temper and invited anyone to produce an engraver, say, or cabinetmaker, to drive a crewel needle through a human skull with a hammer "with such consummate dexterity"—they were his words, sir—as to leave the needle unbroken and the surrounding skin unmarked, as was the case with Miss Pantile.

There, d'you see, the coroner had him. He said, in substance: "You have proved that this needle could not have found its way into the late Miss Pantile's brain from inside. You have also proved that this needle could not have found its way into Miss Pantile's brain from outside."

Reprimanding somebody for laughing, he then declared an Open Verdict.

So the case was closed. A verdict is a verdict, but coroners are only coroners, even though they may be backed by the Home Office pathologist. And somehow or other, for me, this verdict was not good enough. If I had been that coroner, I would have made it: Willful Murder by a Person or Persons Unknown.

All fine and large. But what person or persons, known or un-

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known, with specialized skill enough to get into a sealed house, and into a locked room, hammer a fine needle into a lady's skull, and get out again, locking all the doors behind him, or them, from the inside—all without waking up an eight-year-old girl sleeping by the side of the victim?

And there was the question of Motive. Robbery? Nothing had been touched. The old lady had nothing worth stealing. Revenge? Most unlikely: she had no friends and no enemies, living secluded with her little niece, doing no harm to anyone . . . There was a certain amount of sense in the coroner's verdict. . . still . . .

Only let me solve this mystery, and I'm made, I thought.

I solved it, and I broke myself.

Now, as you must know, when you are in doubt you had better first examine yourself.

People get into a sloppy habit of mind. I once read a detective story called *The Invisible Man,* in which everybody swore he had seen nobody; yet there were footprints in the snow. "Nobody," of course, was the postman, in this story; "invisible" simply because nobody ever bothers to consider a postman as a person.

I was quite sure that in the mystery of Miss Pantile there *must* have been something somebody overlooked. I don't mean Sherlock Holmes stuff, like a cigarette ash, and whatnot. Not a clue, in the generally accepted sense of the term, but *something.*

And I was convinced that somehow, out of the corner of my mind's eye, I had seen in Miss Pantile's bedroom a certain something-or-other that was familiar to me, yet very much out of place. Nothing bad in itself—an object, in itself, perfectly innocent; but, in the circumstances, definitely queer. Now what was it?

I racked my brains trying to visualize in detail the scene of that bedroom. I was pretty observant as a youngster—I tell you, I might have got to be Detective-Inspector if I'd had the sense to keep my mouth shut at the right time—and the scene came back into my mind.

There was the room, about sixteen feet by fourteen. Main articles of furniture: a pair of little bedsteads with frames of stained oak; crewelworked quilts. Everything neat as a pin. A little dressing table, blue crockery with a pattern of pink roses. Wallpaper, white with a pattern of red roses. A little fire screen, black, crewel-worked again with yellow roses and green leaves. Over the fireplace, on the mantel shelf, several ornaments—one kewpie doll with a ribbon round its waist, one china cat with a ribbon round its neck, a cheap gift vase with a paper rose stuck in it, and a pink velvet pincushion. At the end of the mantel shelf nearest the little girl's side of the room, several books—

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Ah-ah! Hold hard there! my memory said to me. *You're getting hot!* . . . You remember the old game of Hot and Cold in which you have to go out of the room, and then come back and find some hidden object? When you're close to it, you're hot; when you're not, you're cold. When my memory said *hot,* I stopped at the mental image of those books, and all of a sudden the solution to the Spindleberry Road mystery struck me like a blow between the eyes.

And here, in my excitement, I made my big mistake. I wanted, d'you see, to get the credit, and the promotion that would certainly come with it.

Being due for a weekend's leave, I put on my civilian suit and went down to Luton, where the orphan girl Titania was staying in the care of some distant cousin, and by making myself pleasant and tactful, I got to talking with the kid alone, in a tea shop.

She got through six meringues before we were done talking . . .

She was a pale-faced little girl, sort of pathetic in the reach-me-down black full mourning they'd dressed her in. One of those surprised-looking little girls with round eyes and mouth always part open. Bewildered, never quite sure whether to come or go, to laugh or cry. Devil of a nuisance to an officer on duty: He always thinks they've lost their way, or want to be taken across a street. It's difficult for a busy man to get any sense out of them, because they start crying at a sharp word.

Her only truly distinguishing mark was her hair, which was abundant and very pretty. Picture one of those great big yellow chrysanthemums combed back and tied with a bit of black ribbon.

I asked her, was she happy in her new home? She said, "Oh, yes. Auntie Edith says as soon as it's decent I can go to the pictures twice a week."

"Why," I asked, "didn't your Auntie Lily let you go to the pictures, then?"

Titania said, "Oh, no. Auntie Lily wouldn't go because picture houses are dangerous. They get burnt down."

"Ah, she was a nervous lady, your Auntie Lily, wasn't she," I said, "keeping the house all locked up like that at night?"

"She was afraid of boys," Titania said, in an old-fashioned way. "Those boys! What with throwing stones and letting off fireworks, they can burn you alive in your bed. A girl isn't safe with these boys around."

"That's what your poor Auntie said, isn't it, Titania? Now you're not afraid of boys, are you?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Brian was a boy. He was my brother."

"What, did Brian die, my little dear?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. "He died of the flu, when Mummy did. I had

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the flu, too. But *I* didn't die; only I was delicate afterwards. I had the rheumatic fever, too."

"Your brother Brian must have been a fine big boy," I said. "Now about how old would he have been when he—passed away? Twelve?"

"Thirteen and a quarter," said Titania.

"And so he passed away, and I'm very sorry to hear it," I said. "And your Auntie Lily wouldn't let you go to the pictures, wouldn't she? Well, you must always obey your elders, as you are told in the Catechism. Who did you like best in the pictures?"

Her face sort of lit up, then. She told me, "Best of all I liked Pearl White in a serial, *Peg O' The Ring*. Oh, it was good! And John Bunny and Flora Finch—" She giggled at the memory. "But we had only got to Part Three of *The Clutching Hand* when Mummy and Brian died, and I went to live with Auntie Lily . . . Apart from the danger of fire, picture palaces are unhealthy because they are full of microbes. Microbes carry germs . . . Auntie Lily used to wear an influenza mask on her face when she went out—you know, you can't be too careful these days," said this serious little girl.

"And kept all her windows locked up, too, I daresay," I said. "Well, your elders and betters know best, no doubt . . . But I mean to say, what did you do with yourself? Play with dolls?"

"Sometimes. Or sometimes I did sewing, or read books."

"Ah, you're a great one for reading, Titania," I said, "like your poor mother used to be. Why, Titania is a name out of a fairy story, isn't it? A clever girl like you could read anything she could get her hands on, if she were locked up with nobody to talk to. I bet you read your poor brother's old books, too. I remember noticing on the mantelpiece a bound volume of the *Boy's Own Paper*. And also . . . now let me see . . . a book with a black and red cover entitled *Ten Thousand Things A Young Boy Can Do*—is that it?"

She said, "Not *things! Tricks.*"

"And right you are! And I'll bet you mastered every one of those tricks, didn't you?"

She said, "Not all of them. I didn't have the right things to do most of them with—"

"There's one trick in that book, which I have read myself," I said, "which you did master, though, and which you did have the right apparatus for, Titania, my dear. Tell me what it is. You get a medium needle and stick it down the center of a soft cork. Then you get a penny and place this penny between two little blocks of wood. Put your cork with the needle in it on top of the penny, and strike the cork a sharp blow with a hammer. The cork will hold the needle straight, so that it goes right through that penny. That's the

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way you killed your poor Auntie Lily, isn't it, Titania?"

Finishing the last of her meringue, she nodded. Having swallowed, she said, "Yes," and to my horror, she giggled.

"Why, then," I said, "you must come back to London with me, and tell my Inspector about it."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "Only you mustn't say anything to Auntie Edith."

I told her, "Nobody will do anything dreadful to you; only you must confess and get it off your poor little mind."

Titania's second cousin Edith, by courtesy called "Auntie," came with the child and me to London—and there, in the police station, she flatly denied every word of everything, and cried to be sent back home.

Put yourself in my position, stigmatized as a madman and a brute! I lost my temper, one word led to another, and I "tendered my resignation."

I shall never forget the sly expression on the girl Titania's face when she went back with her Auntie Edith to Luton.

I have no idea what has happened to her since. She will be about thirty-eight or thirty-nine by now, and I should not be at all surprised if she had turned out to be quite a handful.

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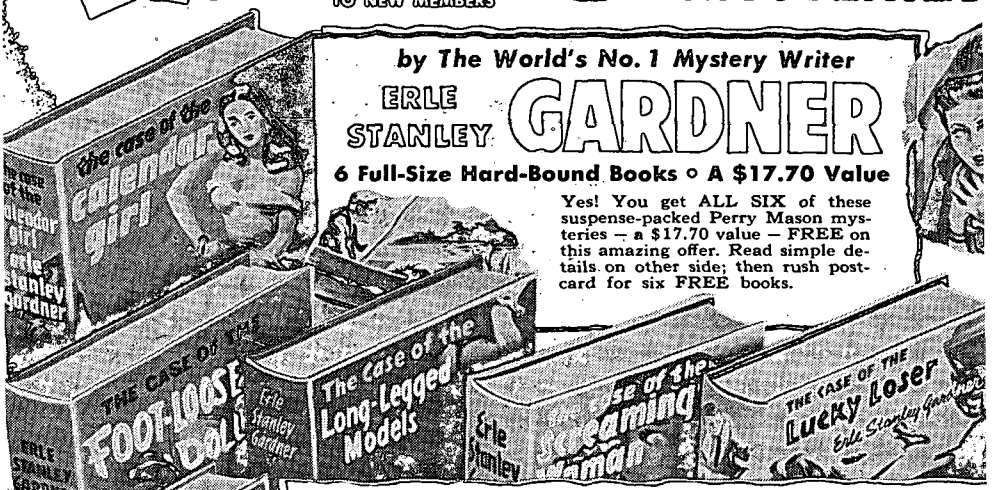
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